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“I AM COLD LUNCH”: An anthropological perspective on children’s cultural identity and understanding of food through an ethnographic study of food and eating in public elementary schools

Andrea Thompson
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Abstract
Children face a constant barrage of advertising- at home, on sports fields, in playgrounds, on the street, and in school. Nationwide we are faced with rapidly increasing health problems in children, such as obesity. This study investigates how children understand the cultural constructions of food in consumer society through an ethnographic study of food and eating in public elementary schools. In my research I have focused on the effects of the new American foodways- the beliefs and behaviors surrounding the production, distribution, and consumption of foods- on children by examining how advertising in schools as well as how the food served in schools facilitates the development of food preference. This thesis asks the question “How do children understand the cultural constructions of food in consumer society, and how does their understanding effect their cultural identity?”

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“I AM COLD LUNCH”: An Anthropological perspective on children’s cultural identity and understanding of food through an ethnographic study of food and eating in public elementary schools.

by

Andrea Thompson

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of B.A. Anthropology and International Studies

Pacific University
2007

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“I AM COLD LUNCH”: An Anthropological perspective on children’s cultural identity and understanding of food through an ethnographic study of food and eating in public elementary schools.

by Andrea Thompson

Chairperson of the Supervisory Committee: Professor Cheleen Mahar
Department of Anthropology

Children face a constant barrage of advertising- at home, on sports fields, in playgrounds, on the street, and in school. Nationwide we are faced with rapidly increasing health problems in children, such as obesity. This study investigates how children understand the cultural constructions of food in consumer society through an ethnographic study of food and eating in public elementary schools. In my research I have focused on the effects of the new American foodways- the beliefs and behaviors surrounding the production, distribution, and consumption of foods- on children by examining how advertising in schools as well as how the food served in schools facilitates the development of food preference. This thesis asks the question “How do children understand the cultural constructions of food in consumer society, and how does their understanding effect their cultural identity?”
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Glossary

**Gastronomy.** The study of the relationship between culture and food.

**Dysphoria.** An identity crisis.

**Consumer Culture.** The recent developments in young peoples social worlds, the power of advertising, media and other meaning-making practices that have saturated the life worlds of children through symbolic re-organization of the production, promotion and consumption practices of commodities and the effects of this on the ways children build their identities and relationships.

**Ethnographic research.** A holistic research method founded on the idea that human systems cannot be studied independently of each other. Ethnographic research entails examining a society or community from both and inside and outside, “making the strange familiar and the familiar strange”.

**Qualitative data.** The collection of data that is not numerical in nature. Qualitative research asks, “What is data and how should we collect it?”

**Semi-structure open-ended interviews.** Interviews where no formal questions were proposed but rather formulated of and by the interview from a list of subjects. The interviewee has the freedom to interpret the question and answer it as they see fit.

**Participant observation.** A qualitative method of research where the researcher becomes involved in the lives of the subjects, both by participating and observing for the purpose of data collection.

**Implicit meanings.** Ideas created by a cultural product that are implied or understood though not directly expressed. Different meanings are communicated to people from different cultural, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds.

**Affinity group.** A group of peers already acquainted in life prior to the interview.
"I am cold lunch". These powerful words were uttered by nine year old, Ashley. To her, these words are a statement against the low quality food served in her school, the strong and persistent messages kids receive from the media – that junk food is ‘kid food’, and the mysterious origins from which these foods come. Ashley’s family has been a part of the community in Forest Grove, Oregon for several generations. Although her immediate family has adopted suburban life her grandmother still resides on a small but fully functioning farm. Ashley’s family eats only fresh produce and home cooked meals. She has rejected the images about food presented by the media and has defined herself as in opposition to fast food culture, speaking out against it at every opportunity. At school, she brings food from home for lunch everyday. She is one of two students in her class who eat “cold lunch”. At the lunch table, she dominates the social politics among her friends. Ashley is whom other students want to sit by. Her lunch is full of homemade lasagna, fresh tossed salad, fresh fruit, and cookies that had been baked just the night before; and she shares. Ashley’s relationship to food begins as a seed in the soil and is an important part of her identity.

My food tradition is an integral part of how I understand the identity of my family, my culture, and myself. This powerful relationship with food that I share with my family, and my friends is becoming uncommon among children in America. The role of food as a marker for ethnic heritage, family, regional- time and place bound identity has been replaced with the brand name products, cultural images, and the influence of consumer society over identity formation. I believe this recent break in traditional food relationships has led American culture into a gastronomic crisis and is directly related to health problems now facing children. In the past 30 years obesity has tripled in children between the ages of 6
to 19. Between 1990 and 2004 type-2 childhood diabetes rose more than 300 percent.\(^1\)

The culture of this great country has been founded on the idea that we are a “melting pot”. We are a country of people from many cultures; our food traditions reflect this more so than any other social avenue. American cuisine includes foods indigenous to this continent such as turkey, corn, and squash. As well as a mix of various foods and meals from other cultures. Each region of the United States has a distinct cuisine and food tradition depending on what immigrant culture is or was dominant. Pastas, burritos, tacos, hamburgers, pizza, chowder, tex-mex, Cajun, soul food – such as fried chicken and collard greens originating among the African slave population to name just a few. This is true American cuisine. However, the image that comes to mind when one says, American food, is of greasy spoon diners, burger joints, and drive-thru diners, in other words, fast food. These foods, and new foodways- the beliefs and behaviors surrounding the production, distribution, and consumption of foods, have come to embody the idea of American culture. This standardized system of production line, homogenized foodstuffs’ have stripped us of our national cuisine.

Cultural deterioration is a savvy process\(^2\). Cultures slowly decay through a gradual meltdown of values and behaviors that undermine the societal fabric. That decay has now manifested itself in our youngest generations. Americans are now known as the dumbest, fattest, and least aware among first world countries. We have undoubtedly reached a cultural crisis point. We know this because for the first

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\(^1\) Schor (2004) page 34.

\(^2\) By savvy process I mean the well-informed actions taking place having a multiple effects and unforeseen outcomes through which the general population is ambivalent too until the full force of the actions are felt.
time multiple social medias, which helped create the crisis, have turned their attention to informing the general population of its existence. All over the country there has been a call to arms by parents, educators, and people who have decided to reaffirm their definition of good and bad influences over our children and cause meaningful change to protect their future. This activism signifies that we have reached the crisis point.

The outcry over this absurdity that has taken over our cuisine has hit mainstream media in multiple ways. Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal, written by Eric Schlosser in 2001 began the infiltration into popular culture. Schlosser investigated the history and growth of the fast food industry in American culture. He explains how fast food culture… "has helped to transform not only the American diet, but also our landscape, economy, workforce, and popular culture" (Schlosser, pg. 3). In 2006, Fast Food Nation was transformed into a narrative feature film grossing over one million dollars at the box office. Of course that was small change compared to the over eleven and a half million that Super Size Me, directed by Morgan Spurlock earned in 2004. “Super Siz Me” took the concepts discussed in Fast Food Nation and put the health risks of fast food to the test. These works have become major players in the rethinking of our cultural relationship to food.

Books, documentaries, and films are not the only ways that we are becoming disenchanted with our gastronomic crisis. The idea that we have lost something

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3 See slow food movement, slow schools, edible schoolyard for an example of this activism.
4 See Acuff and Reiher (2005) for further discussion.
in our domination by fast food culture has become a marketing technique. There have been several advertisements and commercials circulating which utilize this idea to sell their products through the nostalgia of what has been lost. For example, Hamburger Helper has recently been running a commercial featuring a very middle class family with a mom, dad, brother, and sister, complete with mid-western accents. The idea here is to introduce the stereotypical American family. The viewer sees these characters rushing around doing things, obviously a very busy on-the-go modern family. They finally all sit down at the table, and the mother says, “Our lives cross over dinner, and Hamburger Helper helps us.”, followed up by another family member narrating the slogan, “Our table, Our dinner, Our Hamburger Helper”.

Beyond Betty Crocker, the company that owns Hamburger Helper, the fast food industry is taking their own shot at the nostalgia of the family meal. Kentucky Fried Chicken began their “Bringing Back Dinner” campaign in 2006. Among their many commercials my personal favorite begins with a scene where a suburban teen (about 14 years old) is hanging out in his friend’s kitchen, talking to his Mom on the phone:

“I’m at Jimmy’s house, can I stay for dinner?...Yes, his parents are home...yeah, dinner...(sighs) Hold on—*she doesn’t believe me!*”

(hands phone to perky pony-tailed soccer mom)

“Carol?...Yeah, we’re all having dinner—together!”

Cue triumphant chorus of Lynyrd Skynyrd’s “Sweet Home Alabama,” and oily voice-over:

“A real meal on a weeknight? What a shocker! Pick up a nine-piece bucket of original recipe drumsticks and thighs for just $6.99! Bring back dinner at

---

7 For more information on what exactly the “Bringing Back Dinner” campaign is all about check out KFC’s website. http://www.bringbackdinner.com/
KFC! Now all KFC original recipe and extra crispy chicken has zero grams of trans fat with the same great taste you love!”

The family plus the friend sit down around the table, set with white ceramic plates, where at the center sits a huge glowing bucket of KFC original chicken and as the family begins to dig into their meal the slogan across the screen reads “Bringing Back Dinner!”

The appearance of such types of advertisements represents the level of social and cultural acceptance that the traditional American concept of dinner has been lost and with it, family time around the table and home cooked meals. When I first began to see such advertising I was troubled, and a bit shocked, but as this type of advertising continued, I began to ask myself, “is it really this bad?” These ideas of cultural deterioration, domination by fast food culture, the loss of the American traditional cuisine, and of the cultural constructions of meals and eating caused me great distress and this was the motivation for my project.

In September of 2006, I began an investigation of how children understand the cultural constructions of food in consumer society, how their understanding of food affects their cultural identity and how these ideas may connect to the rising health problems faced by American children. After reviewing the literature available on the anthropology of food, consumer studies, research regarding children’s health, and the nutrition education children receive; my project soon became an ethnographic study of food and eating in public elementary schools. My informants are 24 students out of a class of 30 - 5th graders at an elementary school in Forest Grove, Oregon. In my research I have focused on the effects of the new American foodways- the beliefs and behaviors surrounding the production, distribution, and consumption of foods – on children by examining how the food served in schools facilitates the development of food preference. I completed nineteen interviews, eighteen
individual and one group interview. I spent at least one day a week with my class and ate lunch with them during their lunch period.

The school was an excellent space for my research as it provided a safe and conducive environment for me to interact with, interview, and eat with many different and wonderful children. A school is also an interesting avenue for a study of food as the food served in schools is accepted by American culture as being among the most undesirable food one might eat. This was true when my parents were growing, this was true for me in school, and still today school food is the subject of parody and my informants had quite a bit to say on the topic.

In September, I attended a seminar at the Center for Ecoliteracy in Berkeley, California. The title of the seminar was “Rethinking School Lunch”. In general, the purpose of the seminar was to network with other concerned individuals who have all realized the state of children’s health and cultural relationship to food and asked, “What are we going to do?” The seminar offered tools and creative solutions to the challenge of improving school meal programs, developing ecological understanding, raising academic achievement, and the general well being of our children. Empowered by the resources I gained from the seminar I was better able to identify the social and cultural messages that are impacting children’s cultural understanding of food and eating; children receive from school food, the cafeteria, and through social rules during a meal.

The school where my research took place is an upper elementary school and only included the 5th and 6th grade. The school is divided into two buildings, East and West, each two stories tall, containing a total of 17- 5th grade classes and 18- 6th grade classes, each with approximately 30 students. The buildings are divided again by program, this specific school contained three programs, each program
was named after a continent. The talented and gifted program is called “Africa”, the English emersion program is called “Australia”, and everybody else fell into the continent known as “Europe”. The classroom I worked in was in “Europe”.

The lunch period is separated by continent, in Europe there are two separate lunch periods, each with a combination of both 5th and 6th graders. My class had first lunch, beginning at noon until 12:35pm. We had to be excused as a class in order to leave for lunch. To be excused the entire class must have washed their hands and be seated quietly at their desks. This was not always an easy task. Often my class would be among the last to be excused, and I believe my presence affected their ability to calm down and sit quietly. After the class is excused, they line up in two even lines at the classroom door, and using a system of line leaders and line checkers, they make their way down the hallway in series of three stop and go segment patterns. At each stop checking to make sure they remain to be in two straight and quiet lines.

Once the students reach the cafeteria they again form two straight and quiet lines leading up to the lunch cashier, where they input their student number which deducts funds directly from their student account for the meal. If they do not have enough funds in their account for the meal they receive a cheese sandwich wrapped in plastic. At the cashiers station the students also pick up a round, blue plate with portion sections and their choice of small containers of chocolate, regular, or strawberry milk, or a choice of apple or orange juice.

Next, with plate in hand, the students approach a large roll up divider window in the wall separating the cafeteria from the kitchen. At the window, a staff member and two student helpers place pre-made, heated, and sometimes wrapped items of the students choice on their plates. The menu items vary from day to day. The
options are divided into groups; each day one option from each group is available.\(^8\)

Favorites: tacos, spaghetti, mashed potatoes with chicken gravy…

Pizza: Pepperoni or cheese, dip and dunk cheese stuffed bread sticks…

Grill: hamburger, cheeseburger, garden burger, hotdog, corndog…

Deli: ham & cheese, turkey sub, ham and turkey, tuna…

Salad Bar: always lettuce, usually carrots and broccoli cauliflower mix or peas…

Offering Bar: Usually a container with apples or oranges sometimes canned pears or peaches in syrup.

Once the students have their food they sit at designated tables for their class. My class has two tables they are allowed to sit at. The amount of time the students are given to eat depends greatly on how long it took them to be excused, and move quietly down the hallway, which dictates how long the line from the cafeteria entrance to the cashier is. On average my class has about 10 minutes to eat, sometimes less. Once about half of the 35 minute lunch period is over, the lunchtime aides (three people wearing orange reflective vests walking around making sure everyone is behaving and not sharing food) raise one of their hands signifying its time to be excused for recess. In order to be excused the students must raise their hand and remain silent until everyone at their table has done the

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same. Then the aide will excuse your whole table. My informants would always pressure me to eat faster so I would raise my hand and our table could be excused. They would get very irritated at each other if a couple of people were still chatting and eating when the time came to be excused. When the aide’s hands first go up, kids start stuffing as much food as they can get in their mouth before shooting their hands up and attempting to swallow. Whatever time is left is used for play either outside or in the gym.

The fact that I participated in this system with them, including what I refer to as “doing the line dance” - the system of standing, checking, and walking in lines, allowed me to ease into “kid culture” and really become accepted by the students. I am the only adult who does participate in this process with the children, and for some time before they got used to my presence they were constantly asking me why I obey the rules and stand in line. Many of the students suggested that I should cut to the front of the line because I can, because I am an adult. Several of my informants have become quite good friends with me at school and they have been an amazing inspiration for me. These children have taught me a profound amount about life, and among other things patience.

During the school day I would tutor students who needed a bit of extra help. At times this was a challenge on its own as I was relearning things I had long forgotten right along with the fifth graders. On Fridays, for about one hour, I would prepare an activity for us to do together as a class regarding nutrition and culture. The students seemed to truly enjoy talking about food and culture. These activities were also practice in thinking critically about the topics I would be asking them about during interviews, as most of the students had never really given these concepts any thought.
I began my interviews in February of 2007. It took me some time to collect the proper approvals and signed consent forms to begin interviews. My questions were designed to open discussions, which the children would develop and take in their own direction. I asked questions regarding their understanding of “good” food, “healthy” food, “bad” and “unhealthy” food, as well as questions regarding the social and cultural constructions of foods, such as; what is “cool” food? What happens during a meal? At home? At school? I also inquired into their understanding of food advertising and brand awareness.

The interviews often took on their own different direction, leading me into subjects I would have never thought to discuss. Often when I would ask a direct question about a meal or type of food, I would be answered with a narrative describing the political situation among the student’s family, or the student would express a view to me that they had developed from listening to comments their parents had made regarding social class, which far surpassed my initial question. Many students brought up issues of body image and responsibility of weight management.

Using the data, narratives, and observations I have collected in my research, I have divided my analysis into discussions of cool foods (including brands), good foods (and how this concept is developed), healthy food (and nutrition education), social aspects of the mealtime (location, conversation, politics of the table), and how all if these implicit meanings of food have effected or defined my informants cultural identity.

Children use food to express their understanding of health, social class, the concept of what’s “cool”, body image, social relationships, and their cultural identity. My informants described the implicit meanings of food through their narratives proving that it really isn’t “that bad”. Our fast food culture may have
gained domination over our national cuisine but our cultural conceptions of food are still intact in America’s youth. I believe that if those responsible for the well-being of America’s children – the families and schools begin to give greater attention to their children’s relationship to food, (not only what they are eating, but how, where, and when they are consuming it, and what messages they are absorbing and observing) we can reverse the disturbing health trends and cultural deterioration experienced by children in consumer culture. There is hope, we just need to be mindful of our children’s relationships, understandings of our culture, and do what we can to help foster those relationships.
America’s story of food has been one of vast landscapes and agricultural innovation, a melting pot of ethnic culinary traditions. The postmodern era has brought the rise of fast-food culture, the downfall of the nuclear family, and cultural leveling, which among other aspects of life has drastically changed the foodscape of American cities. In my research I have focused on the effects of the new American foodways— the beliefs and behaviors surrounding the production, distribution, and consumption of foods— on children by examining how the food served in schools facilitates the development of food preference. This thesis has attempted to explore how children understand the cultural constructions of food in consumer society, how their understanding of food affects their cultural identity and how these ideas may connect to the rising health problems faced by American children.

In conceptualizing and framing my study I have used a method known as devouring theory. This method entails using theories from many disciplines, under no specific framework for the purpose of an informed analysis. I chose this method for two main reasons: First, historically children have been seen as less important than adults in academia\(^9\) and therefore their understandings of their everyday life-worlds have been largely ignored rendering many theories inaccurate for my means, and secondly much of what has been done on studies of food and

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\(^9\) The trend has been to view the child as unimportant as they are not yet ‘functioning’ members of society. Children have historically not been placed in the role of the consumer or had any influence over how the family functions economically. Children also have not been seen as able to make decisions or independently run their own lives and as such have not been perceived as affecting social systems. This however had changed significantly post baby boomers and has just began to be addressed by scholars.
eating has focused on either distinct ethnic communities with strong food traditions\textsuperscript{10}, or was written longer than two generations ago and I must consider the validity of such frameworks \textsuperscript{11} in a dynamic and quickly changing area of study.

For the purpose of investigating how children understand the cultural constructions of food, I have summarized some of the literature available on the role of children in consumer society and discourses defining ‘kid culture’. In order to examine how children’s understanding of food affects their cultural identity I have drawn on a variety of works written by historians, sociologists, and anthropologists. I have also summarized some of the more ‘classical’\textsuperscript{12} theories on food and eating. This chapter provides the historical and theoretical backdrop for my analysis. The following is a brief review of some of the available literature on consumerism, food and eating, and identity.

**Consumerism: The role of the Child and the School**

The study of consumerism is a fairly new field, and even less examined has been the role of the child in consumer society. The discourses that surround consumerism speak of a culture in which the act of consuming has come to be a source of identity – especially through association with brands also, the desire to consume has become a motivating force.

Juliet B. Schor, the author of *Born to Buy*, begins with a discussion of The Changing World of Children’s Consumption. Schor explains that not only as an

\textsuperscript{10} See Morgan’s (1950) depiction of “Moctzemas’s Dinner”, Radcliffe-Brown (1948) on food and social sentiments among Andaman Islands, Evans-Pritchard (1940) on cow-time among the Nuer, Richards (1939) on nutrition, agriculture, and social life among the Bemba.

\textsuperscript{11} Frameworks: A set of assumptions, concepts, values, and practices that constitutes a way of viewing reality. (The American Heritage Dictionary)

\textsuperscript{12} By this usage of classical I mean theories written more than two decades ago.
Schor uses the term “Kid-fluence” (Schor, 23) to represent the growing influence children have over the household spending. She attributes this raise to a number of factors, including a change in parental styles. She depicts a shift in the belief that parents know best, a more authoritarian parenting style to the strategy of giving children a choice and the belief that with choice comes a “learning opportunity”. She sees this shift as occurring in the generations following the baby-boomers. Another aspect of “Kid-fluence” is the “nag factor” (Schor, 25). The nag factor has become so strong because time pressures keep parent’s from spending as much time as they used to with their children, causing parent’s to spend more money on their children, “Guilt money”, and give in more easily than ever before to their wants. Schor names food as the area where these factors are most predominant.

13 Promo Partners refers to a relationship between a media source and a product were an exchange of funding for product promotion takes place.
The idea that with choice there is a learning opportunity is part of the ‘kid empowerment’ discourse. This discourse has saturated the social lives of children. In my own research I have found that the cafeterias in most public elementary schools operate under the kid empowerment discourse. For example, the school where my research was centered offered the children the option of four entrée items each day, a grill item (hot dog, corn dog, hamburger, ect..) a favorite item (mashed potatoes and chicken gravy, spaghetti, nachos, ect..), a pizza item (cheese sticks, cheese pizza, or pepperoni pizza), or a deli sandwich (Turkey, ham, or cheese). Although there is always a healthy choice available, such as the sandwich, the children consistently choose the item that most closely resembles a culturally designated kid food. Kid food, as defined by my informants is junk food, fast food, things that are small and can be eaten with just your hands, things that are ridiculously large, things that resemble other things [for example Baby Lucas- a popular mango sweet and salty powder that you have to suck out of a baby bottle it comes packaged in, a typical example of trans-toying], and things that revolt adults.

This being said, my informant’s choices for school lunch ranged from pizza, chicken nuggets, cheese burgers, foot long hotdogs, nachos, ect… The healthier options such as the sandwich or rotating menu items that were ‘on the healthier side’ like spaghetti or chef salad were disregarded. The learning opportunity that exists in the school cafeteria is defined by a food hierarchy constantly being reaffirmed by the presence of kid food options, my informants have learned what they are supposed to be eating and that is apparent in the food choices they make at lunch. This is not what was intended by “empowerment”, however this is the

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14 The ‘kid empowerment’ discourse is the idea children are capable of making informed decision in their own best interest.
reality of the situation and it raises questions regarding the validity of our current
definition of childhood.

The postmodern childhood Schor describes, is not only inundated by advertising
efforts, but has severe consequences. She discusses children’s daily media
exposure and the changing free time usage trends. She estimates that the average
American child spends five hours and twenty-nine minutes a day with media
(Schor, 33). Not only does this lead to lower numbers in daily activity, but also to
the formation of food preferences.

“Children eat excessive quantities of advertised food products
and not enough fruits, vegetables, and fiber. Among children
aged six to twelve, only 12 percent have a healthy diet, and 13
percent eat a poor diet. The rest are in the “needs
improvement category”. (Schor,35)

Poor diet, historically, has been a problem for families living in poverty, but now
50 percent of children get the majority of their calories from fats and sugars, as
shown in a 1997 study (Schor. 34). Ironically, 1997 was the same year soft drink
companies began placing their products in school buildings. The nutritional
quality of the food children eat, teamed with lack of physical exercise, has caused
the obesity rates among children to double since 1980, and with such, weight
related diseases such as diabetes II and hypertension. According to the Body
Mass Index (BMI)\textsuperscript{15}, about 25 percent of American children are now either
overweight or obese. In correlation with the raising number of overweight
youths, are the raising numbers of young girls beginning to diet, at alarmingly
young ages.

\textsuperscript{15} It should be noted that the BMI system has been harshly critiqued as it is based on age, height, and weight
leaving room for gross inaccuracies when defining who is overweight, underweight, and obese.
In Chapter Three- From Tony the Tiger to Slime Time Live- of Born to Buy, Schor describes the dual messaging advertisers utilize to most effectively market their products. In the case of food, items that are taboo in the adult realm are the ones that kids want the most. Schor uses the example of candy:

“In the case of colored candies, the divergence between adult and children’s tastes is largely symbolic. Adult’s are perfectly willing to eat artificial color; it’s just we prefer muted tones, such as brown, or pastels. …Children take the symbolic order of adults and turn it on their head, going wild for food that adults deem inedible or gross. Kids like brightly colored candy that transforms their tongues or other body parts. …They delight in blue, a color that is particularly taboo for adult food.”(Schor,58).

Children give great prestige to foods that adults will not eat; this empowers children, allowing them to create autonomy through their consumption. Of course, the people who market to children have already figure this out.

Schor also talks about dual marketing in which a product is marketed to both mother and child, but for different reasons. She uses the example of Kool-Aid, which tells mom there is vitamin C, and the ability to control the sugar content, and kids are given the idea that Kool-Aid is cool and magical, thus the giant dancing pitcher of Kool-Aid featured on their commercials.

Another embodiment of dual messaging is McDonald’s Happy Meal. The happy meal made fast-food fun. McDonald’s found that children thought fast food dinning was “boring”, and thus the creation of the Happy Meal, which not only sells a message children can identify with, but also a toy. This has caused two main problems. First, toys attract children to fast food restaurants, and the consumer foods that are not good for them. Second, food that does not include a
toy or is not a toy itself becomes less appealing, which leaves family meals at the table less than the preference.

According to Schor, the structures of consumerism are more than just symbolic. Trans-Toying is the process in which what is not normally considered a toy becomes one. Schor uses food examples including vitamin gumballs, Cheetos that turn your mouth mystery colors, and blue, sugarcoated funky fries. The problem with this says Schor, is that when everything in the environment becomes a toy, there is little left for children’s imaginations.

“If all children’s experiences are geared towards excitement, surprise, and thrills, they may not discover that happiness and well-being are mainly gained through an appreciation of quotidian. They may never learn to appreciate the taste of good wholesome food if they are thought that eating is equivalent to playing”. (Schor, 63)

Susan Linn, in her book Consuming Kids: Protecting Our Children from the Onslaught of Marketing & Advertising discusses advertising in schools, in her chapter Students for Sale. Linn is most concerned about how the environment effects the reception of the message. She argues that children cannot differentiate the message from the messenger; that not only does advertising in schools imply that the school supports it, but that their parents do as well. The school is an environment based on trust, and the presence of advertising in schools, sends the message to the students that those adults in whom they trust think the products being advertised are good for them (Linn, 80).

A significant amount of discussion is given to “pouring rights” – Soft drink companies, namely Pepsi and Coke, have funding contracts with school districts
in exchange for allowing their products into schools in multiple ways—by both Linn and Sehor. Linn states that by allowing soda companies into schools, children start to believe they must drink soda in order to support their school (Linn, 86). Soft drinks are not the only “junk foods” allowed into schools. Vending machines carrying candy, cookies, chips, and other low nutrient snacks are available in most U.S. schools. Food companies such as Taco Bell, Dominoes, Pizza Hut, and even Burger King are also allowed in for lunch (Linn, 88). The danger in this identification with “junk food” and school is described best by a U.S. Department of Agriculture report written in 2001.

“When children are taught in the classroom about good nutrition and the value of healthy food choices but are surrounded by vending machines, snack bars, school store, and a la carte offering low nutrient-density options, they receive the message that good nutrition is merely an academic exercise that is not supported by the school administration and is therefore not important to their health or education.”(Linn, 87)

The question of just how far consumer culture has infiltrated schools is asked by Jane Kenway and Elizabeth Bullen in their book, Consuming Children: Education- Entertainment- Advertising. Kenway and Bullen are sociologists, mothers, and professors at the University of South Australia. Their work has been defined by the idea that we live in a postmodern era of media-consumer culture where “childhood is out of order”. One of their conclusions is that parents and students have become educational commodities. “Parents are told to ‘shop around’. In this process there are complex psychological forces at work. At one level the task of choosing a school operated through the conventional discourse of education including a focus on such issues as school facilities,
appearance and performance ratings. On the other hand, however, this task activated a non-rational sphere of desires, fears and fantasies, commensurate with everyday shopping practices.” (Kenway and Bullen, 137).

The idea that parents and children are consumers of the education system is present in my research findings. At least a few of my informants admitted that their family uses a relative’s address in order for them to attend a certain school. The reason for this as stated by my informants is the appearance of the school they are attending in comparison to the others available in the area. As one of the newer schools in the Forest Grove district the school where my research was centered carries the reputation of having the most current teaching practices, technologies, and design features. One student stated that she uses her grandma’s address because the school she is supposed to attend is surrounded by a barbed wire fence, which her mother finds offensive and I can’t help but agree.

Also, Fran Scott the Food Service Director for the Forest Grove School District has this to say about Sodexho – the districts food provider, “Most (food providers) think of them as just kids. We see them as valued customers… That’s the Sodexho difference. Treat all customers with respect; pamper them with genuine affection and work as advocates to support your (parents) mission. Your students deserve the best. They deserve the Sodexho difference”16 The Forest Grove school district has made it clear that they perceive the parents and students as consumers of their schools. Fran Scott’s quote also implies that Sodexho is itself a brand that is part of a parent’s very identity, Sodexho purchases parents like commodities, bought by the idea that Sodexho is inline with the parents mission providing genuine affection to their children.

16 Taken from the Sodexo page on the Forest Grove School Districts website. 
https://www.sodexhoeducation.com/segment%5F0200/district%5F5514/ENM/hp%5Fdistrict/
In *Chapter 3 - Polarizing pleasures: the allure of the grotesque*, Kenway and Bullen offer an in-depth analysis into ‘Kids’ Culture’ and how it can be defined. They believe marketers have constructed a culture specifically for young people to isolate them as a marketing segment, converge their social lives with that of advertising allowing for cross-selling, licenses merchandising, and product placement (such as sponsored textbooks in school and Dominos pizza sold during lunch, ect...). Also, Kid Culture has been created by simultaneously collapsing and exaggerating generational gaps allowing children to become autonomous consumers and constructs adults and education in a negative light. Through the creation of this separate culture from that of the adult world children have been offered a new identity in line with consumer culture. Kid Culture has been integral in my research as it is through this identity that children have come to understand the cultural constructions of food.

**Food: Identity and Meaning**

Food and identity is regarded as a complicated process of linking ethnic traditions, cultural histories, nationalities, political ideologies, and personal geographies through food to a person’s definition of self. Studies linking food to identity have asked the question, “what are the implicit meanings of food and how do they define who we are?”

Historian Peter Scholliers, author of *Meals, Food Narratives, and Sentiments of Belonging in Past and Present*, has developed a theory that states food plays into identity in two realms, the primary – a stable identity based in the family and community, and in the secondary – a manipulated identity based on institutional aspects for example the politics of becoming vegetarian. Scholliers believes the role of food in the representation and identity of a person is a process that

\[\text{Scholliers (2001) page 6.}\]
operates through many social medias, “the individual, a close and a distant group declared peers, a ‘contrasting’ group, and a mixed group of remote mediators that includes teachers, journalist, scientists and other producers of ideology.” (Scholliers, 3). Identity is a difficult concept and Scholliers argues that there is no right answer; no definitive definition of what identity consists of. Rather identity should be viewed as a conceptual tool for studying the past and present.\(^{18}\)

Contrary to Scholliers, French sociologist Claude Fischler believes that the world of food and foodways – both culturally as well as by the advancement of technologies are causing a crisis in how people identify with food. He asks, “What are we actually eating?” and the crisis is, “Who are we, then?”\(^{19}\). I have found both Scholliers and Fischler’s theories to be relevant in understanding how my informants used the implicit meanings of food in the formation of their identity.

One of the most intriguing works I have come across in relation to food and identity is “Remembrance and Repasts: An Anthropology of Food and Memory”, by David E. Sutton. Sutton researched the historical consciousness of the people on the island of Kalymnos, Greece. His work connects food and memory as an integral part of Kalymnian historical consciousness through grounded ethnographic methods. Sutton discusses how memory and forgetting encode hidden meanings throughout our social lives, he states “Like food, memory is clearly linked to issues of identity: gender, class, and other.” (Sutton, 6). Sutton examines foods role in life-cycle rhythms, and the social uses of food among Kalymnians, noting that food generosity is a way of elaborating group identities.


\(^{19}\) Fischler (1996) pages 859-79
“in particular a “modern” identity that poses itself in contrast to a lost past in which generosity made up the shared substance of everyday life on Kalymnos.”
(Sutton, 17) He also examines the changing foodways and their implications for the generation of “food based memories”.

He concludes that among the Kalymnians, food is used as a form of cultural identity maintenance. The sensory experience available through food empowers memories – “returning to the whole”20. Sutton found this to be accurate in both residents of Kalymnos and other migrants who have left their homelands behind. The idea that food is a form cultural identity maintenance and of the implications of new foodways on historical consciousness is important in understanding how the idea of traditional American cuisine has been altered, and what effect this has on American people. While the foodways have only changed slightly between my generation and that of my informants, our definitions of what constitutes American cuisine have been drastically altered. The same infiltration into popular culture through books, films, documentaries, and advertising that has awakened American people to our gastronomic crisis has been the defining media for my informants and their understanding of American food. My informants and I share a different historical consciousness when it comes to our understanding of the cultural construction of food.

Sutton's work, as well as my own, has been informed by the works of Mary Douglas. Mary Douglas has given much consideration to the cultural and social constructions of the meal. One of her most well known works on food is her article, Deciphering a meal, first published in 1972. In this article Douglas offers a structuralist analysis of the meal consisting of a basic equation, A + 2B (meat and

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20 Sutton (2001) page 17
2 vegetable). Through elaborations on this basic equation Douglas argues that there are significant patterns that meals follow throughout the day, week, and year. For a meal to be a meal, Douglas concludes, it must recall the structure of another meal. A decade later, Douglas refined her theory regarding the meal by adding a sense of evolution, “To treat food in its ritual aspect is to take account of its long spun out temporal processes. It is an evolving system that can be a metaphor for any other evolution, great or small, the evolution of just one marriage, and even of the whole human species” (1982:115). The idea of meal as metaphor, incorporating all the associated social symbolism is central in my understanding of the social politics of the meal as described by my informants.

Claude Levi-Strauss, a contemporary of Douglas’s, has developed what it perhaps the most well known theory in the sociology of food and eating. Levi-Strauss is concerned with the creating theories encompassing universal human characteristics, as is the case for his concept of the ‘culinary triangle’. The culinary triangle follows the idea that humans are products of both culture and nature, creating binary opposites from which social life can be understood. Raw food, sits at the top of the triangle, as it is the least transformed. Cooking; as a cultural process transforms foods. The equipment and utensils needed to perform the

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21 Douglas (1975), page 239.
transformation dictate where the form of cooking will be placed within the triangle, closer to culture or nature. The most natural process possible for food is to rot. Levi-Strauss’s triangle is one of the ways in which I interpret and understand how my informants perceive the cultural construction of ‘good’ food.

Another important theory by Levi-Strauss in relation to the understanding of ‘good’ food is his concept of “good to eat” and “good to think”. This theory is in reference to the process of food preference formation. Good to eat is food that is nutritious while good to think is food that fits into the category of what is “good” or socially and culturally acceptable to eat.

Another interesting and notable work from which I have based my perspective on childhood and the meaning of food is: The Lost Child in the Woods, by Richard Louv, a beautifully written book linking the absence of children’s relationship with nature to childhood trends such as obesity, attention deficit disorder and depression. Louv makes many of the arguments that I intend to make, but he places the emphasis on nature, as I will on food. He argues that children today are suffering from nature deficit disorder, a very similar concept to my gastronomic dysphoria. He begins by explaining that within just a few decades the way children understand and experience nature has changed radically. Free and natural play has become merely an eclectic artifact in today’s modern era of kid cell phones, instant messaging, and video games. He argues that today, kids are aware of global threats to the environment but now lack their physical contact, and intimate relationship with nature. We now consume, watch, wear, and ignore nature. Louv says, ” How the young respond to nature, and how they raise their own children, will shape the configurations and conditions of our cities, homes—our daily lives”.

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Louv argues that although nature has utilitarian values, it has meaning on a deeper level, to inexplicably provoke humility. Just as food serves to sustain us, it provokes connections, connections to culture, nature, the past, ethnicity, the family, and traditions. Louv also says that nature provides a sense of wilderness that implies chaos, the unknown, realms of taboo, and “the habitat of both the ecstatic and the demonic”. Food can provide similar entryways. Food allows us to experience exotic places, erotic senses, sensual experiences, and taboo behaviors.

The term the “new landscape of childhood” was a re-occurring theme throughout the literature I have collected. The new landscape of childhood has to do with concepts of rationalization. The woods and fields are vanishing. They have become something we experience through lessons delivered in schools or through organizations, but we are now deterred from direct experience. The structures of legality keep us out, either by private property or liability issues. I would argue the new foodscape of childhood reflects a similar situation. The connections that we once formed to our culture, family, traditions, and ethnic origins, are vanishing as well. I believe this is due to the effects of consumer society. Parents now spend guilt-money on their children, and food has become an area where marketing influence and decline of parental control are the most pronounce. Children now experience nutritious foods in the classroom and their organizations but by feeding them in school the same food as is being marketed to them outside of school they are deterred from directly experiencing healthy food. The consumer structures now focused on children are keeping them away from the gifts of food.
Standing in front of a class of thirty - ten and eleven year olds I was describing American regional cuisines in an almost evangelical fashion. I asked them what came to mind when they thought of American food. I was answered with “Hamburgers and French fries!” , “Greasy deep fried stuff!” , and “Bad for you food!” Dismayed by these remarks I innocently asked, “Well, what comes to mind when you think of warm apple pie”. Almost instantaneously most of the class, including mainly the boys burst into laughter. I had accidentally made reference to the 1999 teen comedy *American Pie*. The plot of this film is a pact, made by four High school seniors to loose their virginity before graduation. In the film one of the boys is told that sex feels like “warm apple pie”, and later in the film he is subsequently caught having intercourse with an apple pie his
mother had recently removed from the oven. I do not know how many of the laughing children had actually seen the movie as it is rated ‘R’, but they certainly understood the reference. The American Pie incident was my introduction to “kid culture” followed by many other embarrassing moments at my expense.

Kid culture is a generational and place bound set of discourses defined by the current technologies, media – entertainment, and advertising, as well as other aspects of children’s social reality. This thesis is an ethnographic study of kid culture in a broad sense and more specifically an investigation of “how children understand the cultural constructions of food in consumer society”, “how this understanding affects their cultural identity” and “the connection to the rising health problems faced by American children” by examining food and eating in public elementary schools. In my research I have focused on the effects of the new American foodways on children by examining how the food served in schools facilitates the development of food preference.

In conceptualizing my project I subscribed to the ‘end of childhood – out of order’ discourse. This discourse is informed by a social constructivist perspective viewing the child as a historical and social construction which has been subject to changes in conceptions of childhood, child-rearing practices, family life and children’s culture. The ‘end of childhood – out of order’ discourse is heavily saturated with ideas of how consumer – media culture plays a role in the formation of contemporary generational identities. This discourse includes a historically nostalgic perception of the concept of childhood and sees the contemporary conception of childhood as unsustainable and leaving children deficient. It also encompasses the nature of being a child in all regards. I have

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22 For further discussion of this discourse see Kenway and Bullen (2001)
found this way of viewing childhood as accurate both personally and culturally, and it has become an integral part of my positionality.

To describe the concept of a ‘childhood out of order’ and the associated nostalgia one can consider the changes in technology that have occurred in the last three generations. My parents watched black and white television sets constructed with vacuum tubes and played marbles. I was born when the computer was becoming a common consumer item and by the time I was ten years old the games available had to be accessed through a floppy disk using a dos prompt. The ten year olds of 2007 are watching flat screen televisions and playing games that simulate social realities like “The Sims” and “World of Warcraft” over the Internet linked in with millions of other players from around the globe. Just recently, I was watching Saturday morning cartoons and was introduced to Toon Town Online\textsuperscript{23}, a website based online role playing game where children become cartoons and then interact online with other cartoon entities. Toon Town Online is advertised during every commercial break throughout the childrens programming. Consider cartoons, my parents grew up watching the crazy antics of Bugs Bunny. I watched the same crazy antics except shown in color. The Bugs currently on television is a teenager, and has super powers; the show is no longer called \textit{Looney Tunes}, but \textit{Loonatics Unleashed}.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.3\textwidth]{looney-tunes.png}
\caption{Looney Tunes example}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{23}Toon Town Online website:
During the development of my research questions, I did not separate my idea of consumer culture from what I saw as its effect – the ‘end of childhood – out of order’ discourse. In asking how children’s understandings of the cultural constructions of food have affected their cultural identity in consumer society, I am operating under this definition of consumer culture: the recent developments in young peoples social worlds, the power of advertising, media and other meaning-making practices that have saturated the life worlds of children through symbolic re-organization of the production, promotion and consumption practices of commodities and the effects of this on the ways children build their identities and relationships.  

This project was centered at an upper elementary school in Forest Grove, Oregon. My research began in September of 2006 and ended in April of 2007. During this time I collected data using qualitative methods including open-ended interviews, participant observation, and discussions during and after class activities. My informants were students in Mrs. White’s fifth grade class between the ages of ten and eleven. A close friend of mine who was student teaching in her classroom introduced me to Mrs. White. On my first encounter with the students in the class Mrs. White introduced me as a college student who needed their help to get an “A” on a project. There were approximately thirty students in the class, although this number varied a bit throughout the year as a couple of students left and another arrived. Among the students in the class, twenty-four children became my informants.

24 For discussions of similar definitions of consumer culture see Kenway and Bullen (2001), Linn (2005), and Schor (2004)

25 See glossary for definitions of ethnography, qualitative data, semi-structured, open-ended interview, and participant observations.
As my informants were children, I had to actively engage the politics of working with children, a difficult task. I established myself in Mrs. White’s classroom as a volunteer. Each week I would attend class for the full day. During periods of class work I would help out those students who needed a little extra attention. Also, I would engage the students in a class discussion or activity for about one to one and a half hours regarding nutrition and its connection to culture. My status as a volunteer greatly eased the process of beginning a research project with the students in the class. Once I knew, where and what my research was going to be, it was time to submit a proposal to my university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). I was conditionally approved pending a few changes. Alongside the IRB I also needed to be approved by the principle of the school where I was volunteering, as well as the Superintendent of the Forest Grove school district. In whole this process took almost five months.

In late January of 2007 I had lunch with my advisor, Cheleen Mahar, her husband Chris Wilkes, and the Superintendent, Jack Musser. Jack was concerned that my project may place the children in an uncomfortable situation as they range in ethnic and economic backgrounds. With the help of Cheleen I was able to assure Jack that I would be very sensitive to the position and needs of the students who would become my informants. His concerns were sound and it gave me a sense of relief that I had been questioned about my ethics, as should always be the case when children are involved in research. Jack, hesitatingly, but supportive of my project approved my data collection.

Before I could begin interviewing the students they needed to officially become my informants. This involved two separate consent forms, one for the parents, and one for the student. The first series of consent forms went out on a Friday.

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26 For example of these activities see appendix B.
and trickled back in over the next two weeks. Mrs. White helped me out by listing the consent form as an assignment, which if not returned would hinder the student from an extra recess period that happens each Friday. The consent forms were to be returned with or without consent to participate in the project. Two parents denied consent, twenty-four approved consent, and four consent forms were never returned. Once I had the parent’s consent in hand, I individually went over the same form only written at the fifth grade level with the students. I had successfully navigated the labyrinth gaining twenty-four informants, several more than I had expected. The names of all of my informants have been changed to insure ethnical treatment and protection of their identities.

One of the aspects of “kid culture” is to be wary of, and at times oppositional, to adults. Thus, I had to separate myself from the other adults and try to establish an identity in the classroom away from the perception of a teacher and disciplinarian. I did this in congruence with participant observation by participating in the ritualistic behavior system the children follow throughout the day. This included what I refer to as the line dance – standing quietly, and moving in formation with periods of line checks by both the end spotter, and line leader, by eating with them and participating in the customs of the cafeteria including the method of being excused for recess, sitting amongst the students during classroom work and activities, sharing stories about my childhood and listening to theirs. By not identifying myself as a disciplinarian, classroom management during activities or discussions I would lead was difficult. The class would be excited and unruly. After a short period of time and some guidance from knowledgeable friends, I had earned enough respect and rapport with the students that if someone was being disrespectful they would “hush” that person and for the most part used a peer system of classroom management. They also

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27 See discussion of line dance and cafeteria customs on page 8.
stopped referring to me as “teacher” and began calling me by my nickname, Andie. When this change began to occur I knew I had been accepted by the kids and was “in”.

I performed nineteen semi-structured, open-ended interviews, eighteen individual and one affinity group interview. When considering the design of my interview structure I chose semi-structured interviews. I wanted the freedom to formulate my questions on subjects of interest based on the responses of the informants to prior questions. I also wanted the interviews to be open-ended so that my informants could lead the direction of my questions within the subject areas of interest. I used a loose interview protocol organized by subjects during the interviews. I found this technique to be the most useful for my purpose as each child had a unique understanding of the cultural constructions of food and their own ways of expressing the implicit meanings of food.

The logistics of when to invite an informant to come and do an interview with me was tricky. I had to find a student, who was caught up with their work enough to leave the class for a period of time, and to sit with me at a round table in the hallway. I also had to use a time in class, where if I remove a student, they would not miss any directions or information that would disadvantage them. This process worked well but in a sporadic fashion. I could not plan whom or when I would interview, I would just hang around in the classroom throughout the day until an opportunity arose.

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28 Affinity group: a group of peers already acquainted in life prior to the interview.
29 See appendix for protocol.
30 Implicit meanings: ideas that are collectively understood and implied but not directly expressed, subject to cultural, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds.
Once I had begun my data collection I found that the existing frameworks regarding the role of food and identity could not be applied to the children I had been working with. One of the problems I faced theoretically was that children are seen as less important than adults in academia and therefore their understandings of their everyday life-worlds have been largely ignored. Also, the anthropology of food has been heavily dominated by research into the role of food in the identities of distinct ethnic communities. There has been a great deal of research by historians about the role of food in the historical consciousness of nations. Sociologists and anthropologists alike have noted the importance of food in the symbolic life-worlds of different societies through class divisions, gender roles, and social capital. Social economists have illuminated the role of children in consumer society. Instead of choosing a framework from which to interpret my data I have taken a theoretical approach known as ‘Devouring Theory’. I have used cross-disciplinary theories where appropriate in correlation with my interpretation of the data I have collected. Instead of approaching my research with a hypothesis in mind I chose to follow in the tradition of my discipline and listen to the stories of my informants first, and then interpret the meaning.

I have organized the interview transcriptions into categories based on informants and occurring themes. Using the data, narratives, and observations I have collected in my research, I have divided my analysis into discussions of cool foods (including brands and advertising), good foods (and how they are...

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31 The trend has been to view the child as unimportant as they are not yet ‘functioning’ members of society. Children have historically not been placed in the role of the consumer or had any influence over how the family functions economically. Children also have not been seen as able to make decisions or independently run their own lives and as such have not been perceived as affecting social systems. This however had changed significantly post baby boomers and has just began to be addressed by scholars.

32 See Morgan’s (1950) depiction of “Moetzemas’s Dinner”, Radcliffe- Brown (1948) on food and social sentiments among Andaman Islands, Evans-Pritchard (1940) on cow-time among the Nuer, Richards (1939) on nutrition, agriculture, and social life among the Bemba.

33 See Kenway and Bullen, Consuming Children, 2001.
understood), healthy foods, the meal, mealtimes, and identity (ethnic, cultural, and gender).
Chapter 4

ANALYSIS

“I don’t really know why food is cool. I think that eating is just something you do, like it’s a natural instinct. When you’re born, you’re hungry and then… If you were born in the middle of the desert and there was nothing to eat and your mom had nothing to eat… and there was something to eat you would find it… if you were that hungry you would find it when you were just born… I think food is not cool its just a natural instinct. I eat to feel full. I eat to feel better. I eat so I don’t feel pain in my body.” ~ Harrison, age 10.

Originally, I believed that children in current American society faced a type of Gastronomic Dysphoria, meaning a feeling that the connection between their cultural identity and their relationship to food did not feel right, perhaps confused. After beginning my research I realized that my informants were not suffering from Gastronomic Dysphoria—I was. I hesitated with this realization, as I was looking for a link between food and identity, and instead discovered that although I feel a strong link the majority of my informants do not.

“How do children understand the cultural constructions of food in consumer society?”, “How does this understanding affects their cultural identity?” and “What is the connection to the rising health problems faced by American children?” These are the questions I have asked under the assumption that the relationship between American food and culture is “out of order” and that this breach is affecting children’s understanding of the implicit meanings that food holds regarding their identity. Through my participant observations and collected narratives I gained insight into “kid culture” as understood by my informants;
through this insight I came to see how children’s understanding of food has been influenced by consumer society, and what this means both for their health and identity.

The following analysis is divided into six main parts, based on reoccurring themes in the data I collected: cool foods, including children’s perspective on media influence; good food and how this label is prescribed; healthy foods, nutrition education, and the role of the school; the meal and its implicit meanings both at home and in school, as well as the mealtime; and how children understand the relationship between food and their identity.

Cool Foods: Kid foods, Images, and Logics

What is “cool” food? The concept of what is understood as cool in kid culture—what types, brands, and images of food are implicitly agreed upon as embodying what is “cool”—was a predominant and important theme throughout my research. When I asked my informants for their thoughts on “cool” food I was given a range of responses, including a list of culturally implied “kid foods”, narratives describing the role of media and advertising, as well as an understanding of globalized foodscapes. While each child held a common understanding of the concept of “cool” food, there exist many logics as to how this notion came to be.

What foods do you consider to be cool food?
Ummm... chicken nuggets.

Why are chicken nuggets cool?
Because they are little. ~ Kate
The concept of “cool foods” varies greatly from generation to generation, but one aspect remains consistent: if the food allows children to express their agency in some way, it is cool. Among my informants the most commonly named “cool” food item was Kraft Easy Mac, and secondly pizza—in any form, but especially in Hot Pockets. These are items the kids can make for themselves in the microwave, allowing independence from their parents in both food choice and preparation. Self-agency is one of the requirements in defining a food as a “kid food.” Another requirement is that the food must in some way be, or resemble, items that are considered junk food by adults. For the most part, kid food must be either very small—like chicken nuggets—or very large—like 64-ounce cups of soda—but there are exceptions. My informant Kate defined kid foods as, “Chips, pizza, chicken nuggets, hamburgers, and things like that.”

BOX 4.1 COOL FOOD (AGENCY)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Macaroni and cheese… AND PIZZA! They are famous. People who like cheese like macaroni and cheese and everyone has to like pizza. Its pizza! Just the taste of it! ~ Brian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I make ramen, I can make macaroni, and quesadilla, and toaster waffles and strudels. I can make eggs with the yolk or just scrambled. And that’s pretty much it, I’m not very good. Oh and I can make a salad. ~ Charlotte</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kraft. Because the kind of macaroni and cheese I eat is Kraft and I’m sure a lot of people eat the kind with runny cheese and little noodles. And the stuff I make is called Easy Mac and that’s Kraft. They got that and it tastes the same as the stuff you make in a pot. Its good. They make other cheese type things and other foods. ~ Ashton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ramen, Top Ramen or whatever it’s called, noodles. The little pizza pocket things, those are cool, and Hot Pockets, and Sunny D, and the little bottles of Gatorade. ~ Sarah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV dinners, toast, things I know how to make. Brownies. (What kind of TV dinners do you eat?) The brownie and the fish stick stuff and French-fries. I like the ones that come in the red package ‘cause there is bigger stuff. ~ Joshua</td>
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The advertising and brands that are considered cool have to meet certain criteria with children. If commercial advertising is involved, the product must be represented as catering to an active lifestyle. For example, Yo-Go’s, a yogurt that comes in a squeezable tube, is featured on a commercial with a kid riding a skateboard while sucking the yogurt out of the tube. If an active lifestyle is not implied, then the item must have an extra characteristic that separates it from similar items. My informants most consistently named two types of kid food that featured these extra characteristics, pizza and burgers; notable inclusions were Domino’s Cheesy Bite pizza (a pizza whose crust is a pull-apart ring of small dough bites stuffed with cheese) Godfather’s (for tasting better due to extra cheese and sauce) and large menu items from McDonald’s.

**BOX 4.2 COOL FOOD (BRANDS AND ADVERTISING)**

The one where it’s got the cheese dinosaur and he is surfing in the cheese and it’s got the little noodles swimming. Yeah. When I was little and I haven’t had macaroni and cheese before. I saw that commercial with the cheese dragon guy, dinosaur and I asked my mom if I could get that and she said yeah. So we went to the store. Got it. And it was good. ~ Ashton

I wanted Yo –Gos and I still kind of want them.
I wanted to try Go-Tarts and they’re pretty good. ~ Charlotte

Strawberry milk, they make the milk look better. Like the [Nestle] Quik bunny. That’s the kind my mom buys me and you just put the spoon in the stir it up. ~ Joshua

Like the Domino’s commercials with the bite pizza, I wanted it sooo bad cause it looked sooo good and we got it and it tasted exactly the same and I was like “ahhhhhhhhh.” ~ Sarah

Oh like McDonald’s. They seem cool and like tons of kids go there and they say like oh yeah and I got this and that… (What do they say they get when they think its cool)Like Big Macs and like huge burgers and huge sodas and stuff. The kid’s meals are tiny. Kids want the adult meal. (So if it’s really big, it’s cooler?) Yeah. ~ Sarah

Godfather’s. Everyone goes to Godfather’s because it tastes good. I don’t really know what they do to the pizza to make it taste good but I think they might just put extra cheese and sauce to make it taste better. ~ Ashton
The class unanimously agreed that the food currently used as social capital among them is energy drinks. When I asked them why, they described the drinks as being symbolic of someone that lives such an active and exciting life that they need help obtaining the energy to keep up. The kids want to be seen as this kind of cool person, so they drink energy drinks. The top brand among kids currently is Monster, because of the name and the imagery it implies about children when they have too much energy. The product slogan for Monster is “unleash the beast”.

During a discussion group I asked the kids for their thoughts on energy drinks, and learned that drinking them was not the coolest way to consume energy – swallowing a pill is. My informants told me that the Plaid Pantry convenience store in town sells packets of pills that look like candy. These pills sell for $1.98 and are traded among kids in secret because they conceptualize them as contraband, even though there are no rules as to whether they can purchase or consume them. During a private interview, Sarah described her first encounter with these pills after being curious about what all the hype among other kids was about.

“I saw them in a 76 store and I asked the lady what those are and she told me they are energy pills and that you take them and then feel fine. And my aunt took one onetime because she has been really tired because she is pregnant. Well no, she wasn’t pregnant at the time, no no no, I take that back. And she was all like crazy afterwards like ahaahahahha (waves hands above head in a frenzied manner) and so its kind of

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34 Social capital is a concept developed by French Anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu. Symbolic capital is any type of capital that is perceived as prestigious through any socially defined classification. In the case of food and children, purchasing or obtaining a food item, which is perceived as symbolic capital the popularity, or status of the person with the food increases in the eyes of their peers.

35 The energy drink monster comes in a 24 oz can. The can is black with the products name in green dripping letters, as if it were made of toxic green ooze.
crazy and its weird because it gives you energy but it’s a pill and that kind of scares me a little.”

Beyond the concept of “kid foods”, cool is also defined in another way—by what is implied about a food through the act of consuming it. Three of my informants described a different kind of logic in defining what cool food is: presentation of the food itself as strange, but beautiful and exotic, the way food is portrayed in films, and the representation of food through the emotion of the people consuming it. The box below contains a sample of informants’ differing answers to the question, “What is cool food?”

**BOX 4.3 COOL FOODS THROUGH THREE LOGICS**

**SARAH**: SARAH LIVES WITH HER MOTHER AND HER MOTHER’S BOYFRIEND, PAUL. BOTH PARENTS WORK IN THE RESTAURANT INDUSTRY. PAUL IS A CHEF, AND SARAH’S MOM IS A RESTAURANT MANAGER. SARAH’S FAMILY LIVES ON A PIECE OF FARMLAND, ENJOYS FOODS FROM MANY DIFFERENT CULTURES, AND PLACES A STRONG EMPHASIS ON FRESH FOODS.

Uwajimaya (local Asian imports and grocery store) because my mom likes to go there for cool little things because my mom likes little Chinese dishes, and we like the food there and Paul really likes to eat baby octopus, but that scares me. What’s cool is Japanese food, like the octopus and stuff because it looks cool and seems cool. It looks cool how they set it up and they use chopsticks and it looks cool how they use their dishes and how they eat it and set it up and what they eat.

**BRIAN**: BRIAN IS A VERY AWARE YOUNG MAN WHO HAS A STRONG NOTION OF WHATS POPULAR AND FASHIONABLE. HE IS AN AVID MOVIE WATCHER.

Umm, lobster and crab. In the movies that’s what they always order at restaurants.

**KAREN**: KAREN IS IN THE FOSTER CARE SYSTEM. THE FAMILY SHE IS CURRENTLY LIVING WITH DOES NOT ALLOW CHILDREN TO TALK AT THE TABLE OR EAT ANYTHING THAT THE PARENTS DID NOT GIVE TO THEM BECAUSE THE FAMILY follows A STRICT DIET.

The people eating the food… old people and young people they look happy. Oh yeah and there’s one more thing like the commercial cake. How they get a cake and eat it, on the shows. They are happy and it makes me want some.
**Good Foods: Good to Eat and Good to Think**

Good food is constructed by two defining concepts, good to eat, and good to think as described by Levi-Strauss. Good to eat is a way of differentiating between healthful and unhealthy foods, in other words, the nutritional content of foods. Good to think has a more symbolic value, defining foods as good based on what is acceptable or prestigious to consume within a community or society to eat. For example, in the United States we consume cow and pig, but not dog, because dogs are “man’s best friend”. The concept of good to eat is integral in understanding how the construction of ‘good food’ is defined.

Influences such as personal experiences, the families’ food preferences, the concept of acceptable foods, and other cultural constructions shape how children define what food is “good”. The construction of “kid food” greatly influences the idea of “good food” for children. Some children associated “good” immediately with a certain type of food, like Italian, or with a type of food whose taste is consistent, such a fast food restaurant like Taco Bell. Others defined “good” through healthfulness, or the identification of factors like brand names and labeling identifiers such as “organic.” “Good food” contains rich narratives depicting tradition, concepts of social class, and ideas about the wholesomeness of foods.

The tradition of food for an individual or family is a strong defining force that forever shapes one’s relationship to food. In my own food tradition, I define good food as something “homemade”. In stores when I see loosely wrapped cookies or other bakery items with a label that reads “homemade”, it is difficult to turn down even though I’m aware it is not likely that the item is actually homemade. Over the years I have learned that my culinary skills allow me to
produce foods that taste just as good as what I could order in a restaurant, if not better. Good food for me is something I prepared from scratch with love and the intention of feeding someone I care about. Of course, this definition of good food is a concept I developed over my lifetime. My informants’ understandings of this concept are still in a state of development, and each child has taken their own perspective on it, based on their personal experiences and relationship to food.

The development of a definition of “good food” is closely in line with the formation of taste and food preferences. Preferences are largely controlled by the family and what food is served or eaten. Brian explains the role of his mother in how he learns whether or not certain food items meet his definition of “good”: “Well my mom tells me to try it because sometimes if it has something on it that I don’t like she will say it doesn’t really taste it but I usually taste it and sometimes I like it and sometimes I don’t it depends on my mouth, well my taste buds.” Brian’s mom has an intimate understanding of his food preference, as she prepares the family’s meals. He trusts that she takes his preferences into consideration when she tells him to try something, so he obeys her imperatives to taste things, but ultimately his taste buds decide if the food can be considered “good”.

My informant Sarah enjoys food for the sake of food, and so do most of the other members of her family. She explained to me that her definition of what is “good” is bolstered by what her sister believes is gross: “I can just tell sometimes and sometimes I want to taste something and my sister will be like ‘no it tastes gross,’ but then I’ll taste it and it will always be tasting good but I just don’t listen to my sister because she is so picky. She is so picky she only can eat spiral shaped macaroni ‘cause she thinks it tastes different.”
BOX 4.4 GOOD FOOD BY FOUR DEFINITIONS

Taco Bell, Old Spaghetti Factory, Jack in the Box, Red Robin, McDonald’s, Burger King, and stuff like that. ~ Jason

I think organic is good because its healthier and it tastes better and the other kind is not very healthy and if you put to much flavor and its almost to strong and that kind of stuff. so yeah. ~ Charlotte

Brands. I wouldn’t eat that Western Family brand ‘cause I don’t trust it ‘cause it’s made by the store and those kinds of brands. I would go for the fresh ones. Like for pop, like Barq’s or Mug, Pepsi, Coke but I don’t like the ones that are made by the store. ~ Ashton

Fruits and vegetables. ~ Erica

In the case of Jason (quote one in the above box), his family rarely cooks. He often prepares his own dinners from things he only needs to microwave. When his family eats together it usually involves fast food, take-out, or going to a restaurant. When I asked Jason how he can tell if a food will be good he answered, “It doesn’t have to say anything I just need to know what’s in it. Like umm... before I had the TV dinner I knew it was going to be good because I like brownies, fish sticks, and French fries. So I just have to know what I like and then I know if it’s going to be good.” His definition of good food is based on tastes he recognizes through consistent sources; his relationship to food is between microwavable and restaurant-prepared food.

Charlotte’s family, on the other hand, prepares most of their meals from scratch at home. She identifies good food as something that can be labeled organic, but she also specifies foods that are simple, natural, and free from artificial flavors as being “good.” The appeal of “organic” is that it provides more information to the consumer, such as a narrative informing them of where, how, and by whom the item was grown, all within a single label. This label is significantly increases the
perceived wholesomeness of the food in contrast to mysterious origins of highly industrialized foodstuffs. In other words, organic foods are ‘good to think’. Charlotte’s understanding of good food is one defined by nature. Sarah also brought up the idea of organic foods.

“One time I saw a commercial for organic stuff and it looked sooo good but when I got it, it tasted exactly the same. It was organic oranges and orange juice and stuff. My grandma always gets organic stuff or like non-milk stuff because her roommate is diabetic, oops not diabetic I mean lactose intolerant and so she always has soy milk and stuff and chocolate soy milk and I think it tastes the same but maybe even better. I like just regular soy milk, it’s really yummy. I like organic wheat bread because it’s better than the white bread but I still have to eat white bread because my sister will only eat white bread. I have had organic juice a couple of times because my grandma always has it, sometimes it tastes better, sometimes the same, and sometimes worse, it depends on what it is.”

Sarah, by observations and experiences, determined that applying the label “organic” to food does not mean it will taste different or better. Organics are not the only label through which children define what is “good.” While organics are ‘good to think’ generic brands are ‘bad to think’. The taste and quality of generic brands, compared to name brands, was a significant theme in discussions with my informants. Most children believed these items to be of lesser quality, less wholesome, and did not understand how or where these generic products had been produced. The theory among my informants is that generic food items are surplus or defective products from brand name producers that are given to the individual stores. The stores then place their own brand on them, such as “Albertson’s,” “Safeway Select,” and “Western Family.” My informant Harrison did not hold this belief. He believes generic brands are equal in quality to brand

36 For further discussion of the concept of “organic” see The Omnivores Dilemma, by Michael Pollen.
name goods and are the better deal. These are beliefs that Harrison obtained from his parents.

**BOX 4.5 HARRISON**

| HARRISON IS AN ACTIVE BOY WHO EXCELS IN SPORTS AS WELL AS ACADEMICS. WHEN WORKING IN GROUPS HE ALWAYS ASSUMES THE POSITION OF LEADER AND STRIVES TO PRODUCE EXCELLENT WORK. |

I don’t think that if you eat chips it doesn’t matter if your eating tortilla chips, if you eat Tostitos or whatever, or if you eat the Safeway brand, I don’t think any of that matters. I think it does matter for your budget. If you buy the Tostitos brand then your gonna spend 3 or 4 dollars more then you need to. You can get an even bigger bag if you get the Safeway brand.

(How did you learn that?)

My dad. We have never bought Juicy Juice, we have never bought Welch’s, we have never bought any name brand. We have bought Kool-aid before but not very often. Like my mom is addicted to chips and sometimes we buy Tostitos. If my dad goes shopping… my mom drinks wine and if my dad goes shopping he finds the cheap wine ‘cause wine is like 12 bucks a thing so he buys the cheap kind. I learned that from my dad. To spend very little, the very minimum.

While each Childs narrative constructed a very individual method of defining good food there exists a collective understanding that what is good must be fresh. My informants understanding of a good food hierarchy is reminiscent of Levi-Strauss’ culinary triangle[^37]. Depending on their preferences and experiences, my informants ranked food selections using a system of binary opposites -- culture and nature. “Culture” represents foods that have been commoditized in a mysterious way (from a child’s perspective)—these foods have a recognizable, consistent taste and stigma. “Nature” represents a more natural representation of food, food that is understood as being closer to a fresh, natural state of being through growth, production, or preparation.

[^37]: For an explanation of Levi-Strauss’ culinary triangle see the Literature Review of this thesis.
At the top of the hierarchy are fresh foods that have not been cooked. My informants’ understanding of such foods is almost exclusively fresh vegetables and fruits, which are the embodiment of nature. Salad, while held as an equal in goodness to fruits and vegetables, is a cultural transformation of the natural state. The act of cooking is also a cultural transformation; however, culture is represented by restaurants that prepare foods in a rationalized manner to produce homogenized results, while homemade food is closer to nature because the result of the meal is as dynamic as the timing and ingredients that went into it.

The placement of food purchased in stores is defined on the hierarchy by the individual; the label that each food item carries decides its relation to a normal or transformed state. The mysterious process by which generic foods are produced place these items in the transformed category, while organic and brand name items are labels, which connote the “normal” (both in nature and through social

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A meal ordered from a restaurant, made fresh, and consumed at a table in the restaurant/ or take-out.
Opposite of store-bought foods in the hierarchy of goodness is fast food and school food. While fast food\textsuperscript{39} is a culturally designated “kid food,” it is also perceived by children as being significantly transformed: not consisting of fresh ingredients and in an unnatural state, although this does not necessarily dictate how often it is consumed. School food is consumed five days a week for most of my informants. This food appears normal but has transformed characteristics, such as items that are reconstituted with water. The food is not prepared at the school but in an unknown place and simply reheated. School food is highly commoditized, and therefore the most transformed of all foods subject to culture.

**Healthy food: Voodoo Nutrition and Symbolism within the School**

What are healthy foods? The term “healthy” is precariously placed, encompassing both basic nutritional requirements for the human species as well as dynamic cultural conceptions of what health is. In the United States we have the tendency to change our concept of healthy foods almost overnight, amending our understanding to incorporate the next big diet that has all the answers to a healthier slimmer America\textsuperscript{40}. We have taken the word “health”, which means general physical, mental, and emotional wellness and applied it to food introducing a set of rules that must be met. These rules are in a constant state of flux as are the influences to the very definition of healthy food. For example, the food pyramid is revised every few years depending on the current beliefs about fats, carbohydrates, and other compounds. These are prevalent, complex, and

\textsuperscript{39} Food obtained from fast food restaurants.

\textsuperscript{40} For examples of more recent diet trends see “The Atkins Diet” and “The South Beach Diet”.

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confusing images regarding what constitutes the healthy American diet that impacts children’s social worlds.

When I asked my informants, “What is healthy food?” they responded right with fruits and vegetables but the consistency in their answers stopped there. My informants conceptualized the cultural aspects of “health food” in a different ways depending on their level of nutrition education. Understanding how children conceptualize healthy foods came down to how, by whom, and where they had learned about nutrition. My informant’s understandings of healthful foods are derived from their family, the media, and the school; all with differing explanations.

*So how did you learn what to eat?*

  My Mom! (In unison)

The above statement was made by five students during a group discussion. The primary source of nutrition education for most of my informants is their parents. Often, my informants’ knowledge was obtained inadvertently by watching their parents cook, overhearing conversations, observing their parents while grocery shopping, or by using deductive reasoning. For example, Carrie was attempting to explain a snack (that’s name she could not recall) that she likes to eat while watching movies.

*What did they taste like?*

  Cheese

*Were they made of potatoes or corn or…*

  Umm umm… just pure cheese, …Cheetos!

*Cheetos are made of pure cheese?*

  Yeah

*Are they good for you?*

  Umm humm

*Are they healthy or unhealthy?*

  Unhealthy
How do you know they are unhealthy?
Because it has too much grease

She went on to explain later in the interview that her mom doesn’t like to purchase anything that has been deep-fried because of the “unhealthiness of grease”. She associated a certain texture with deep-frying and in the case of Cheetos, she deduced that they must not be healthy as they had been deep-fried.

Similar to Carries understanding of healthy food, Sarah believes anything containing fresh herbs must be healthy. She lives on a large piece of property and her family has a vegetable and herb garden. She described how her mom uses fresh herbs in all their meals and when her sister does not want to eat the green things (because she is a picky eater) her mom says, “it’s good for you”.

BOX 4.6 HEALTHY FOOD (PARENTS)

From Aaron and my mom and my grandma because everyone is into that stuff and the same with my grandpa because he is a taxi driver and he got cancer from eating bad stuff cause he always ate fast food at work. He always tells us if we want to eat that stuff not to eat too much cause its so bad for us. ~ Sarah

They (parents) said that I shouldn’t eat a lot of fat and sugar and stuff like that. Sugar like candy so I shouldn’t eat a lot of candy and fat... umm... meat and that kind of stuff, and bacon... yeah ~ Aaron

Like for the bread I look for see-through wrapping so I can see the bread through the wrapping. (And what does that tell you about it?) You kind of look at the crust and if it has like little seed things on them or nuts. (How do you know that means it’s healthy?) Because my mom always buys the same kind of bread. ~ Jason

Food in the media is another major source of information used by children in defining what’s healthy. One of the many activities I did with Mrs. White’s class was about food histories. I told them the story of the Hamburger, as we know it in America. I had just gotten to the part
where the Russians had adopted a technique of tenderizing and eating meat from invading Mongolians know as Beef Tartar, when a hand popped up. I called on the student and was very surprised to receive not only a definition of Beef Tartar but also a list of what side dishes one would commonly eat with such an entrée. I asked her where she had learned such a detailed culinary account, and she proudly answered, “Yeah. I watch take home chief a lot. And I like to watch the food channel because it’s interesting.”

Cooking shows on television was a common answer to the question, “How did you learn what food is healthy for you?” My informant Robert answered,

Well you can tell by…. if you watch these shows or whatever.

What shows?

Like umm, 30-minute meals or whatever or Paula’s homemade food or whatever.

So what do they tell you are unhealthy or healthy?

Umm.. They don’t tell you what’s unhealthy but they tell you what stuff is good for you. It has Rachel Ray in it. She’s a good cooker. She’s cool.

The Medias position as an educator also works against understandings of health that children gain from other sources. Connecticut Attorney General Richard Blumenthal recently coined what may become the next big buzz phrase in matters of diet and health. He referred to a new product created by Coca-Cola as “voodoo nutrition”. Voodoo nutrition is a catch phrase meaning a “ridiculous attempts to ascribe nutritional value to foods or beverages that actually have little, or none, or are downright bad for you,”41. The product is Enviga, an energy

41 For more information on voodoo nutrition see: Haigh, Susan. Coke drink may be 'voodoo nutrition': Chicago Sun-Times, Feb 6, 2007
burning soda made with green tea extract that is advertised as burning more calories after consumption then it has within it.

Some of my informants expressed a wary understanding of voodoo nutrition, but many others unknowingly have fallen subject to it. This was clear when as a class we discussed the nutritional contents of items and I mentioned that soft drinks are just sugar water and are not a healthy beverage. Immediately hands went into the air. Most of the class (what to me was a shocking amount) was unaware that soda is not a healthy drink, and some students defended it vigorously. One student interrupted another to defensively point out that his mother drinks at least three liters of coke a day. Another student followed by pointing out that the only thing his family drinks is soda. I regretted making the original comment because multiple voices with many different defenses and opinions about soda were flowing at me from all over the room. The students in Mrs. White’s class who were not aware that soda was unhealthy could not accept my comment because of the symbolism it held about their families.

My intention was not to offend the students in Mrs. White’s class by any means. This situation occurred because I was operating under the assumption that soda, as being empty calories is a known and accepted fact. I grew up never having soda in my home and my parents constantly re-affirmed the message that it is bad for you. My informants have accepted the idea that soda is good for them or at least a neutral substance. This implicit message was unknown to me and struck me as being very representative of voodoo nutrition.
In my research voodoo nutrition has been an important theme occurring in the context of the school. There are two main connections between the school and the idea behind voodoo nutrition, the quality of the food being served, and the symbolic meaning the food holds about children’s cultural relationship with food. The food served in schools has historically been of poor quality. It is a difficult task managing all the factors involved in providing a school full of hungry children with a lunch that will satiate them in an efficient and cost effective manner. My parents report having been served poor quality food, I was fed poor quality food, and my informants are eating the same kind of food. The idea that school food leaves a lot to be desired by the palate has been socially accepted across generations as well as being held as a right of passage.\footnote{School food as a right of passages: This idea is not necessarily accurate as it is based on my interpretation of adults who I have asked about their experiences with and thoughts on school food. People seem to have become so blasé to the idea that school food is of poor quality that they believe it only enhances a respect for good quality food and is not necessarily a bad things for children to experience.}
BOX 4.7 SCHOOL FOOD, IN EIGHT VOICES

Ummm… that the milk is disgusting except strawberry milk. Sometimes pizza, the tuna taste good, the gold fish taste good, and the pretzels taste good. The chicken sandwiches aren’t very good. ~ Joshua

(Makes awful disgusted face) It just doesn’t taste the same [Pizza]. The crust is hard and its kind of like beef jerky. The cheese is just like sitting there and when you bite it, it just comes off, and not much sauce. I found a couple onions in it and peppers. So I won’t eat that anymore. Then I went for chicken nuggets, they got soggy ones, they got hard ones, they got normal ones, its just not good. ~ Ashton

I think its kind of gross because I don’t really like their macaroni because their cheese tastes weird and their meatballs taste like all weird… I don’t know. And it tastes like kind of sour. Yeah. ~ Charlotte

School food? Some’s good but most of it is pretty bad. ~ Erica

I think school food is pretty nasty. That’s why I don’t like having hot lunch, I only do like I did when my parents were gone [at the beach for her moms birthday]. I think the food is really gross here and I know its not healthy cause they don’t make it fresh and stuff and its just pretty gross I don’t like it. That’s why I am cold lunch. ~ Ashley

Everything except for pickles and hamburgers is gross. ~ Brian

I think it sometimes ok but sometimes it looks weird and it scares me sometime like the beans, they look kind of dry and the pizza, I like but they like shred the cheese and melt it on to it so it sticks but is weird. And I don’t really like the chicken nuggets because sometimes they are pink a little bit, and I think it is not cooked all the way or maybe it’s a vein. ~ Sarah

It’s not very good. I have only had it like twice. ~ Tyler

The healthfulness of school food came up during a group discussion. My informants had this to say:

They don’t care! ~ (unison)
They don’t care if you eat healthy. They just make the food taste good; well they think it tastes good, so that you’ll spend your money to buy it.

They put that stuff the Chinese used to put in their food (MSG).

Do you think they make healthy food?

No!
Yes!
They have a salad bar and stuff…
My informant’s perception that the school “thinks” the food tastes good and only serves the food in order to make money is inline with multiple key ideas about children’s social worlds. As discussed in the above sections of this chapter, the cultural construction of “kid food” is represented by what’s served in the school. The school must also compete for the business of the consumer, in this case the parents and students, by providing students with what is believed to be their want. According to Sodexho, the Forest Grove School Districts food provider, children want the following:

“Students want nutritious foods. They also demand taste and the freedom to select from a variety of foods. They want fast and convenient service and payment options. Meal participation grows when we meet their priorities, and better-fed students perform better in their studies.”

Offering children the freedom to select from a variety of foods is another key implication on our cultures current perception of childhood. The idea of choice as learning opportunity is part of the ‘childhood empowerment’ discourse as defined by Schor. As I have encountered in my research, children are not making the “healthy” choice at lunch. In part this is due to the fact that the healthier choice is the least desirable option of the foods available – affectionately referred to as “rubber meat” sandwiches. Rather my informants consistently choose items that are at least symbolic of what’s “cool”, such as pizza, hamburgers, nachos, etc…

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43 For description of menu and entrée options review page 7 of Chapter 1: Introduction.

44 Taken from the Sodexho page on the Forest Grove School Districts website. https://www.sodexhoeducation.com/segment%5F0200/district%5F5514/ENM/hp%5Fdistrict/

45 For discussion of this discourse see page – of my literature review.
The salad bar is a required part of the student’s lunch; however this rule is not enforced. Most students take at least one item from the salad bar. This item is usually the fruit of the day (it rotates by day on a weekly schedule), consisting of something swimming in a thick, sweet, syrup. From my own experiences in the cafeteria, I have found that the vegetables are often still frozen. I discovered this on my first time eating with the students after selecting a spoonful of peas (not realizing they were frozen) only to be laughed at when I attempted to eat them by a table full of kids who knew and were just waiting for me to take that first bite.

My informants’ narratives clearing present school food as poor quality, however there is some disagreement or confusion rather, regarding its nutritional content and whether it meets the criteria of “healthy”. Most of my informants have assumed that the food served in schools is healthy, simply because it is within a school. I asked them what foods specifically and they would list off the normal lunch items, hamburgers, cheeseburgers, pizza, corn dogs, hot dogs, and most commonly chicken nuggets. I would then ask if these foods were healthy if consumed outside of school. My informants would become visibly perplexed, as they know these food items are considered fast food, and they understand fast food to be very unhealthy. Most of my informants came to the conclusion that items like these must always be healthy. I have been referring to the contradiction between the idea of fast food and food served in school as the chicken nugget discourse.
Lunch, is not the only place where the chicken nugget discourse affects children. Those who eat breakfast at school believe sugar rich breakfast foods to be “a part of their balanced breakfast”. Mrs. White explains, “And their breakfast foods are sometimes… would you like fruit loops, or frosted flakes, or a cinnamon roll. Other times its French toast sticks or things like that but for the most part it’s a sugar filled, carbohydrate stuffed surprise. Which doesn’t really help with having their energy levels crash when they have burned off the sugar in the first 45 minutes of the day.”

The cafeteria itself, as a site of consumption plays into this contradiction. The signs in the cafeteria have messages about eating healthy, a sign above the roll-up window where food is served says “Kids Way Café”, and the walls are lined with images of fruits and vegetables. School lunch seems like it should be such a simple process but its complicated and message laden. The messages children are
receiving through the food served in school, the rhetoric surrounding the experience of school lunch, and the cafeteria is that school food is healthy. This message is sending students off into a culture dominated by the fast food industry with the belief that such items can’t be an unhealthy, nutrient lacking form of food, since this is what students have spent their childhood eating in school. This is voodoo nutrition.

Mrs. White elaborates on this idea of voodoo nutrition and school food: “I know that their lunch menu makes them think that what their serving is nutritious, but it isn’t the case. Like their heart shaped chicken nuggets instead of cookies on Valentines Day.” So it’s probably true if you were to survey the kids … like with the breakfast cereals they have frosted flakes and fruit loops. …and honey nut cheerios and some other thing. So I would say that if my school was serving that for breakfast it has to be nutritious because why would the school have a breakfast food that isn’t nutritious. So that would be my kid perspective on… well that means we should buy it at the store then because they are serving it at school and why would they serve something that isn't nutritious at school.”

Beyond the food served in school and the experiences students have eating it as modes of learning, students also receive some formal health education in the classroom. In their own words,

*What do you learn in the classroom about how to eat healthy foods?*

Nothing.
They don’t talk about food.
We talk about not to smoke or drink or do drugs.

This is a common theme among health education strategies in schools. Children begin learning even in Kindergarten why it’s important not to smoke. This preventative approach to health education is continued throughout the public
school experience, with the later incorporation of sex equals disease and babies to the trio of don’t smoke, do drugs, or drink. This system has been highly criticized however it remains an issue because the funding sources through the federal government require these items to be taught. And as Mrs. White described, there is not a lot of time to teach health in other regards.

“I am not quite sure what the educational requirements are for health and nutrition in the previous grades. It seems like the requirements for 5th and 6th which is you go over the food pyramid again even though the food pyramid keeps changing, and then you talk about what’s good for you to eat. Then you move on and normally health gets left in the dust when they change the reading or math requirements. And they are not tested on health concepts; they’re tested on reading and math. Sometimes on social studies but mostly reading and math. So those are kind of the well, if you have time, fit it in.”

She also describes the position she is placed in as a teacher in the public school system.

“There’s a lot of things on our plate. Like okay, so I’m going to teach them about nutrition, I’m going to teach about slavery, I’m going to teach them about why people explored what they did to the native Americans when they got there, we’re gonna talk about how the government was formed, how the government works. Oh, by the way we are also going to do science inquiry. We are going to talk about what a variable is, what a control is, we are going to talk about how to measure something. Oh you’ve never seen a ruler before and you’ve never used one, so now we’re gonna talk about how a ruler works, how a stop watch works, how do you tell time? Oh, you don’t know how to read a clock you need a digital one, okay so now you can’t use a stop watch unless it’s a digital stop watch. Oh, now you need to go to PE class ad your going to learn this and this and this. Oh you can’t spell. Don’t worry, we’ll cover that. So now we have spelling, oh your supposed to be writing but you can’t spell but we’ll figure out a way to get your assignments that your supposed to have written in and they need to be edited. That’s like a very small chunk of what we (educators) deal with.”
The question of responsibility and the politics of making healthy food choices came up in one of my interviews. Harrison believes that the responsibility of eating right lies mainly with the parents but that the child needs to use their own common sense as well. He acknowledges how complicated the process of maintaining a school lunch program is, “They offer food to the kids who can’t get food at their house but you don’t have to have that food and they try to do the best that they can”. Harrison also points out that while the food is not as good as what you could bring from home, you can still create a healthy meal from what is made available by the school.

I think when it (becoming unhealthy or overweight) happens to kids it’s the parent’s fault. Well it’s somewhat the parent’s fault but it’s the kid’s fault too. The parents choose what they want to feed them but you choose how much you want. So like if you’re eating potatoes and you choose to have two instead of one and a half of one then that’s your fault but if you go to fast food every single day then its some degree your fault and some degree your mom and dad’s fault… its kind of confusing.

(How do you think the school fits into it?)
I don’t think the school fits into it at all. They offer food to the kids who can’t get food at their house but you don’t have to have that food and they try to do the best that they can but… if… I mean… they always have a sandwich over at the side… and that’s what I usually get because the other stuff is nasty. You don’t have it as good as you could if you brought food from home but you could make it so you’re not just eating the rubber meat. You could have a sandwich and salad or a sandwich and pears or just a sandwich.

It’s… (the breakdown of responsibility by percentages)

- 5% School
- 45% You
- 50% Parents

(What about advertising and media?)
That fits in about… well that would be a %5 and make your parents a 45%. You don’t have to watch TV that’s not an essential in life. You don’t have to listen to the radio that’s not an essential, you don’t have to look at billboards, you don’t have to have a car, you don’t need any of that stuff. All you need is shelter, food, and water. So I think the media fits in the same as school. You don’t have to go to school but most people choose too. You don’t have to have a TV but most people choose to have one. If you choose to have a TV then you choose to have all the bad stuff that comes along with that like media, laziness, not wanting to go outside, just sitting or laying watching TV for 6 or 7 hours a day… its… yeah.
The Meal: The Symbolic Worlds of Food and Eating as Understood by Children

The sharing of food, a meal, the home; these are words rich with meaning and feelings of comfort. A meal, as defined by sociologist Roy C. Wood, is an occasion when two or more people come together primarily for the purpose of food consumption. The concept of a meal is in itself a social construction, however the concept of a ‘proper’ meal produces a symbolic entity of ‘home’ and ‘family’. The meal can also be a metaphor, used as a mode of communication. The concepts communicated by the meal convey important messages regarding class distinctions, gender roles, and other social constructions.

What is a proper meal? In my home, similar to Wood’s definition, a proper meal consists of the family gathered around the table to enjoy each other’s company while eating a hot meal. This seems to be a definition that my informants and I share. Many of my informants expressed that while dinner together is not always a possibility, it is the preferred manner of dining. The meal itself is subject to cultural shifts in the definition of what foods represent family ‘values’ as well as what times of day constitute legitimate meals.

I asked my informants where and with whom they have their meals. Through their responses it appears that the dinner table is the location identified as the proper place to have a meal although that may not always be possible. Ashley references the table as a location for “special” meals, Ashton compares the dinner table to “home”, and Erica states that “we like to sit down together at the table as a family … as often as we can”. The table is the heart of spatial dynamics occurring within the home.

In contrast, many of my informants listed the meal as a time when the family is split into groups by age or the family members go their own ways. Erica, described her family as splitting through the preferred forms of entertainment they wish to pursue during the meal. Carrie, who is living with a foster care home describes the meal as being split between the “parents and family” and foster care children. In Charlotte’s family the split is defined by age ranges from which conversation can be most closely matched, she and her bother sit together while her sister and parents sit together. The situation in Brian’s home is similar defining the space between children and “grownups”.

**BOX 4.10 MEALTIME**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Just at home, like at the dinner table. ~ Ashton</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Umm well we either eat at our kitchen counter or the dining room and sometimes we are aloud to eat in the living room. Well if we eat in the dining room its usually on a special occasion like breakfast on a special occasion or if we want to sit down and have a nice dinner ~ Ashley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well, as much as we can we like to sit down together at the table as a family but my mom tries to do it as often as we can ~ Erica</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 10: MEALTIME (table)
BOX 4.11 MEALTIME

We go home and then everybody goes to separate places most of the time. We don’t sit at the table because the table is too small. I watch TV with my mom. Well... I... me and my mom watch Everybody Loves Raymond and Till Death. My little brother watches TV downstairs and my other little brother just plays while he eats. He has his transformers ~ Erica

The parents and family sit at the counter and we sit in our living room..... We have two tables, ones in the living room with a TV and ones a counter ~ Carrie

My mom, and dad, and my sister (18) usually sit in the living room, and my brother (13) and me are in the kitchen. ~ Charlotte

Not together at the table. I sit at the table, only the kids sit at the table the grownups sit in the living room to watch my grandpa. ~ Brian

The table and the associated rules behind eating there can also be used as a place of symbolic actions. When I was a child my sister and I would kick each other under the table in a fight for domination over who could place their feet on the tables horizontal support bar. If it was not that we were fighting over that, then we were fighting over who got the chair closest to mom. Ashley tells a similar story.

“And what happened was when my dad was little my aunt, not the aunt I was talking about but my other one, she was a really fast eater so she would always finish but she couldn’t be excused until my dad was done eating so he would eat slower and slower and so she’d kick him in the shin to make him go faster”

The school lunch tables are another location of spatial symbolism. As Erica describes below the seating position based on the “inside” or “outside” of the lunch tables.

“We were well... well Ashley was eating cold lunch like usual and me and Becky went to go to lunch and then we got our food and everything and then we got to the salad bar and Becky said “I call the inside of the table”, so I went and sat at the outside of the table so she could sit on
the inside and then she came and said she called the outside of the table but she had called the inside. Then Becky went and sat at another table and then we didn’t see her at recess at all until we lined up.”

KFC would like people to believe that the death of the meal is looming as families become more individualistic and fractured by time constraints. Although the meal appears to be very much alive it has become a hybrid of ‘home cooked’ items and quick and easy foods like frozen, boxed, or canned goods. During an activity with the kids where they were assigned to create a cookbook based on their families food tradition, most of the class returned with recipes that read, “boil water, open box, cook”, or “open can, heat, and serve”.

Erica describes what types of foods are in her home and how they are store:

“Well, we have a fridge which is small, our freezer where everything is piled in there because it’s small. Its like half the size of a normal fridge cause we have a big cupboard above the fridge and everything is all puzzled in there and when you pull something out you have to hold the other stuff up so it doesn’t fall out. Our fridgerator doesn’t usually have that much stuff in it because we have boxed food most of the time. And our cupboards are full of food. And then we have our cans and half cans and stuff.”

Ashton describes what he had for dinner the evening before our interview, on “leftover night”:

“Last night. Well, I had quite a bit of food. I had a burrito, and hot dogs with ketchup. The hot dogs were good. They were big. The burrito was about this big (hands show approximately one foot). And then I watched American idol. My sister was upstairs. She ate a bean burrito. I think she had two. My mom had three been burritos but I think they were Resers and she just cooked them in a pan. Me and my sister wanted to make it ourselves. We put beans, cheese, taco sauce, umm.. extra cheese. Got to have the cheese. Ours were homemade. Umm my dad, I forgot what he had. It took awhile to figure out there was so much stuff we couldn’t
decide. There was macaroni and cheese. There was some chicken. There was corn dogs, hot dogs, and bean burritos. That was about it. After dinner I had two grandmas cookies (the brand), chocolate chip, that was good. After that it was nine o’clock and I had to go to bed.”

Leftover night occurs once a week in Ashton’s home. A normal meal for him however follows a more traditional model. “We have a main course, like chicken, and then she’ll (his mom) sometimes have vegetables like green beans and carrots or broccoli and then a fruit like oranges or apples.” Ashton explained that dinner at the table is commonplace and boring. He is excited by the thrill of choice on leftover night, and he gorges himself on the available foods.

Recently, there have been several meals invented by the media. These meals have been created to sell more commodities, but my informants perceive them as ways to offer more options and times to have a meal presenting them with a choice regarding where and what to consume. When I asked the class, what meals do you eat? I was answered with a selection traditional meals and ones created by the media, this includes breakfast, “2nd breakfast’ (Thanks to the Lord of the Rings film series), snack, lunch, “lunner” (am &pm), dinner, desert, midnight snack, and 4th meal (courtesy of Taco Bell). My informants could not differentiate between these meals and their understanding is that these are all legitimate mealtimes.
Mary Douglas, in her article “Food as a System of Communication”\footnote{Douglas, M. (1982), "Food as a system of communication", in Douglas, M. (Eds), \textit{In the Active Voice}, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London.} describes how food is a metaphor for our social worlds, “Food is…. the medium through which a system of relationships within the family is expressed. Food is both a social matter and a part of the provision for care of the body.” (1982:86). The system of relationships within a family is a complex system of dynamic family identity formation. Food is one of the many forms where the family identity can be expressed. Food is a form of symbolism where the politics occurring between the members of a family are expressed. Food as metaphor is at work in the narrative of Joshua.

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|l|}
\hline
\textbf{BOX 4.12 JOSHUA} \\
\hline
Joshua is ten years old and a very sweet young man. His parents are divorced and he spends his time split between his mother’s home and his father’s who has remarried. \\
\hline
\textbf{(Who chooses what you will eat?)} It sort of switches around. Me, my mom, my mom’s boyfriend, my brother, and at my dads - my step mom.
\hline
\textbf{FATHERS HOUSE} \\
\hline
\textbf{(What types of food do you normally eat?)} Just stuff. \textbf{(Who do you share your meals with at your dads house?) Everyone because we all sit at the table. \textbf{(What do you guys talk about when you sit together?)} I don’t know. I am usually quiet. I don’t like to talk at that table. \textbf{(Do you guys eat all your meals together at the table?)} Yeah. Every two weeks I go there for the weekend. So I get to stay at home for 2 weeks!
\hline
\textbf{MOTHERS HOUSE} \\
\hline
\textbf{(What types of food do you normally eat?)} Spaghetti, cereal, and if there is a lot of strawberries that my mom buys for me, than strawberries. [Strawberries are Joshua’s favorite food and when asked if he could only eat one thing for the rest of his life he answered strawberries.] Oh and Sloppy Joes that my mom makes, and carrots. \textbf{(Where in your home are you allowed to eat?)} No, not my brothers room, sometimes my mom’s room, the living room, as soon as the table gets cleared off the dining room, and my bedroom. but then I push all the crumbs into my garbage can. \textbf{(Do you ever eat together as a family?)} At my dads house we do because we have a table. We used to at my house because we did have a table that didn’t have a lot of stuff on it and we will be able to once my mom sorts out all the Tupperware. Sometimes we all eat in the living room and watch a movie.
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}
Throughout Joshua’s narratives he describes his mother’s house as ‘home’ and his father’s house as a colder place in which he does not belong. He described not feeling welcome in his father’s home because of the actions and attitudes he experiences from his stepmother. Joshua, as any child does, needs nurturing. In his description of the conversation that goes on during mealtime at his father’s home he states, “I don’t like to talk at that table.” When asked what he normally eats at his mother’s home Joshua replied “… strawberries that my mom buys for me…” These two comments reveal Joshua’s understanding of where and who is nurturing and comforting for him. The home is one of the most important places in our everyday life worlds. The table, as a consumption site, is one of the places in the home where children express their agency. I interpret Joshua’s description of the food served at his dad’s house as “Just stuff”, while going into more detail when describing what he eats at his mother’s house as a way of contesting the fact that he has to be there at all.

Conversation at the table is one of the fixtures of the ‘proper meal’. Who is allowed to speak and what the expected and appropriate topics of conversation are one of the ways in which the family’s identity, and the roles of the members are solidified. Charlotte’s description of the ‘table talk’ in her home was the typical response embodying typical family roles, “We talk about like school and my brother talks about how boring school is and I talk about how fun school is and yeah. My mom and dad talk about bills and stuff and my sister talks about sports, she is doing track and she says it hurts.”
During the group interview one of the kids farted\textsuperscript{48} causing instantaneous snickering the other kids quickly began to make fun of him. Sara described how farts are reacted to in her family, “my sister always sings a song about foods that make you fart but not at the dinner table because its not dinner time talk.” Then the kids began to sing, “beans, beans the magical fruit the more you eat the more you toot” followed by a long period of hysterical laughter. This bodily function and associated reactions as well as other bodily functions such as burping, snuffing (inhaling quickly through the nose to clear nasal passages), and crying were identified as not being appropriate table behavior.

The ‘table talk’ is not the only manner from which familial roles and power structures are defined and affirmed. The one who chooses the meals and prepares the foods has very consistently been the mother among my informants. This is a historical trend in America as the kitchen has taken on a female identity\textsuperscript{49}. A theme has developed in some informants’ narratives identifying the notion of ‘mother’s burden’ – meaning women are regarded as the nourishers, men the providers, and as such domestic routines are centered around the men\textsuperscript{50}, it is the mothers burden to please and provide for the man. Ashley’s narrative illustrates this point as she describes how the food preferences of her, her sister, and her mother are put second to that of the father and brother.

\textsuperscript{48} Farting: The action of passing intestinal gas through the anus.

\textsuperscript{49} For further description of the feminine kitchen see Kane’s discussion in her article, “Who Deserves a Break Today?: Fast Food, Cultural Ritual, and Women’s Place. (2002)

\textsuperscript{50} Valentine and Bell (1997) page. 73
ASHLEY IS ONE OF THE TOP STUDENTS IN THE CLASS. NOT ONLY IS SHE ONE OF THE BRIGHTEST BUT THE SASSIEST TOO. HER GRANDMOTHER OWNS A LOCAL FARM AND HER FAMILY HAS A GREAT DEAL OF RESPECT FOR FRESH FOODS. SHE IS ONE OF TWO STUDENTS WHO ALWAYS BRING COLD LUNCH.

Brownies, they are really good. I like spaghetti, it's not that good for you but I still like it, it's my favorite food. And I like peanut butter. My mom always tries to buy the healthiest kind but nobody else likes it, I'm the only one who likes it, she buys Adams. But umm she hasn't been buying it because my dad hates it.

I usually drink water unless it's the summer and my mom buys crystal light. We don't usually have juice or anything. We have milk but I don't like to drink it. My mom buys 2% but I don't like it. I like slam milk and so does my sister (twin) but my dad and brothers like 2% so that's what my mom buys and I don't usually drink it.

Not really it's really just what my mom wants to make. Sometimes things will just pop into her head that she wants to try something that she hasn't made before or something that she made before that we really like. But see my dad doesn't like a lot of food like he doesn't like soup but my mom likes to make soup and she makes really good soup but he thinks its just like an appetizer cause it doesn't fill him up so she doesn't make that very often.

My informant Erica also discusses the mother’s burden; however the ‘burden’ her mother faces is not to please a male figure, but her children. Erica’s mom works two jobs and has only a small amount of time to spend with her children during the week. This time frame falls over dinner.

ERICA LIVES WITH HER MOTHER AND SIBLINGS. SHE EATS BOTH BREAKFAST AND LUNCH AT SCHOOL AND STAYS WITH A RELATIVE UNTIL AROUND DINNER TIME WHEN HER MOTHER PICKS HER UP. HER MOTHER WORKS TWO JOBS TO SUPPORT THEIR FAMILY. THIS IS ERICAS DESCRIPTION OF THEIR MEALS.

What did you have for dinner last night?
I had long john silvers. I had a fish fillet and some shrimp and a hush puppy. It was good.

How often do you eat there?
Pretty often.

How many days per week?
About two.
Erica’s meals consist of fast or take out food. She has been conditioned to prefer that type of food, as it is what she eats for breakfast, lunch, and dinner at least five days a week. It is significant that she does not prefer it when her mother cooks. This may be due to the fact that she prefers a certain type of food that is different in taste from things that are homemade. Her statement may also reflect the time constraint between her and her mother. If her mother cooks, that is less time to spend as a family than if the food were to be purchased ready to consume. Erica’s mother’s burden is to please her children while spending the little amount of time they have together in the evening.

**Identities and Meaning: Eating, and Food Tradition**

“What are the implicit meanings of food and how do they define who we are?” Identity is a tricky subject. Lambek and Antze have defined it as, “Identity is not composed of a fixed set of memories but lies in the dialectal, ceaseless activity of remembering and forgetting, assimilating and discarding.”

Food acts as a link between ethnic traditions, cultural histories, nationalities, political ideologies, personal geographies and a person’s definition of self. Among my informants strong links between food and identity have been forged. These links include the
personal choice of becoming vegetarian, a connection to fresh food so strong it led one informant to reject fast food culture in all its forms including school food, gender identity and the assimilation of ethnic cuisine into a place – bound food tradition.

Food, as a medium of communication, is a central idea of Steven’s. Steven, through his love of animals became a vegetarian at a young age. His family has accepted his lifestyle choice and in the process has cut down meat consumption to two days a week. Steven made this decision after discovering that meat comes from animals, a concept he did not understand until the age of 7. In the classroom, Steven speaks out about animal rights whenever the opportunity presents itself. His peers respect his decision and purposely do not discuss eating meat, killing animals, or anything negative regarding vegetarianism when in his presence. Steven’s sense of self in relation to other is defined by his choice to be a vegetarian, even at such a young age.

*How does your family feel about becoming partially vegetarian?*

They are okay with it besides my brother. He doesn’t like it. He just complains a lot like, “we haven’t had meat in such a long time!” (Whiny voice)

*So what made you decide to become vegetarian?*

The fact that it’s killing animals. That’s basically it.

*How did you come to that realization?*

I don’t know, I just like animals and I decided not to eat meat because its animal. I just found that out after awhile.

*How old were you when you decided to become vegetarian?*
I was 7.

When you first decided did you know you were becoming a vegetarian or did you just know you didn’t want to eat meat?

I just knew I didn’t want to eat meat.

Steven, through his choice to not eat animals has become an activist at a very young age. Another student, Ashley, has also taken a stand symbolically through food. She refuses to eat school food based on the grounds that the food is not fresh. She also has decided to consciously reject the cultural messages suggesting that ‘junk food’ is what she ought to be eating as a good American child. Ashley has rejected the images about food presented by the media, “…when I see it on TV it looks even more disgusting then it normally would”. Ashley had this to say about school food, “I think school food is pretty nasty. That’s why I don’t like having hot lunch, I only do like I did when my parents were gone (at the beach for her moms birthday). I think the food is really gross here and I know its not healthy, they don’t make it fresh and stuff and it's just pretty gross. I don’t like it. That’s why I am cold lunch.” Ashley has defined herself as in opposition to fast food culture, maintaining her identity through consuming fresh from the earth produce, and homemade foods.

Ashley was one of the students in the group interview. She pointed out to the other kids during a discussion of what foods kids normally eat that their own words are proof that they are being controlled by marketers.

What do you think most kids eat?

Student 1: Junk food.

Ashley: They aim it at kids because then the parents will get it.

Student 2: Like Pop Tarts! Those are so good.
Student 3: Because they think it tastes good.

Student 4: It tastes really good!

**Ashley: Not its not!**

Student 2: Like Baby Lucas (mango, sugar, salt, chili pepper powder shake)!

Student 1: McDonalds!

Ashley: McDonalds is disgusting!

Student 3: They burgers are made out of rubber, but it’s better than the school food.

**Ashley: Oh they must have gotten to you then!**

During this group interview my informants touched on another important relationship between food and identity, gender.

Harrison: They need to stay skinny and have compact bodies

Sarah: and then you can get anorexic but you should feel kind of bad if you’re eating a whole pizza everyday.

Ashley: yeah but you should be able to eat a whole piece, everyone can eat a whole piece.

Harrison: You never want to go out with the really teeny skinny girl that doesn’t eat at all. If you take them out they’ll be like “can I have one pea”.

I asked the discussion group for their thoughts on the topic of gender roles and eating because throughout my individual interviews several students brought up the idea that the rules of eating are different for girls than for boys. The narratives
in box 4.15 highlight the general discourse used by my informants when discussing the gendering of food and eating practices.

**BOX 4.15 GENDER AND EATING**

Well I think that in like the 70’s they (girls) were talking about like salads and nothing was cool but now I think its… well for girls its cool to eat nothing well its cool to eat something but minimum, just enough to get by, and for guys its meat, or stuff that will build muscle. I just eat what I want to eat what I feel like eating. I don’t eat huge amounts or teeny amounts I eat something that is healthy, like meat and a salad or we usually have meat and a salad. ~ Harrison

I think they (girls) should eat small amounts too. Because um…. Girls cant really eat that much otherwise like… your stomachs are kind of like sensitive to food and if you eat to much you can get kind of fat and stuff… and… well I just thought that girls should do that and I read books and stuff, like health books and I think I read about it last year but I can’t remember…. ~ Charlotte

I think its … I think its… stereotype and I think that a person should eat how much they want to eat for whatever they want to look like. If they want to look skinny as a twig then they eat a pea for breakfast lunch and dinner but if they want to look just overweight then they eat like a full pizza for every meal. ~ Harrison

Umm and so its better to eat small amounts and I heard there is like this thing where girls think they are fat when they are actually tiny. (Anorexic?) Yeah! (Where did you learn about that?) My aunt, she watched Dr. Phil and there was this lady who was anorexic and so I learned about it and then there were all these shows on about people who were anorexic. And my grandma used to know someone who was anorexic and I had a baby sitter who was older and she would always eat smaller amounts when guys were around. ~ Sarah

Harrison’s commentary regarding the idea that its popular for girls to eat salads in the 70’s but then recently the ideal food for girls is “nothing” while boys should be eating meat is an interesting depiction of what he perceives as the generational gap; a shift from salads or healthy lower calorie foods in general, to nothing or enough to maintain oneself on the break of starvation. This narrative implies that he understands the state of gender perceptions and pressures as more extreme for women today then what it once was. While the diets of boys and men have consistently included lots of protein – the compound necessary for muscle formation. In other words meat equals man food.
Charlotte statement that she believes girl’s stomachs are sensitive to food and if you eat too much your going to get fat is a discourse she developed from forms of media as well as from her mother. During our interview, when I asked her about how she came to the conclusions she had regarding food and gender she told me a story about her mother.

“My mom has been on a diet but then she quit ‘cause she said it was too hard. She went on a diet cause she thought she was fat and she wanted to eat healthier foods and stuff. *(Did you eat the food she ate while she was on a diet?)* Yeah. She made us. It was kind of gross though so I don’t blame her. She did it for like a month. She is kind of trying still.”

Charlotte is describing the effect her mother’s relationship to food has had on her. She explained later that the American diet will “make people more fat” and in relation to women she believes “they should eat more healthier foods and stuff.” She also stated that dieting is hard work and to support her mom she eats diet food along with her. An extreme of dieting mixed with concepts of body image was discussed by Sarah in her narrative regarding anorexia. One of Sarah’s favorite after school television shows is Dr. Phil. Where she first learned about anorexia. She then inquired further into the matter with her relatives. However, she still believes girls should eat smaller amounts of food then boys.

Beyond the implications of food on personal politics and gender identity, food plays an important role in defining a sense of cultural identity. *Once, in a bar, I was asked where I had grown up. When I answered the question with Hillsboro, my interviewer then sarcastically asked if I liked “tacos” — a derogatory comment referencing the large Hispanic population of my hometown. This comment not only offended me but sent me off on a tangent about how I not only liked tacos but an intimate description of my favorite Taquerías and a lecture about the extreme respect I have for Mexican cuisine and culture. My reaction to the*
tacos comment stems from the fact that I have grown up on “hole in the wall”\textsuperscript{52} Mexican food. Originally I am from San Diego, California, and I grew up in Hillsboro, Oregon an area that has a large Hispanic community. From this experience with the cultures that have dominated the foodscapes of my life I have adopted Mexican cuisine into my sense of self. Mexican cuisine is not only my favorite food, but also it is a part of my identity, strongly linked to my emotions and it is a symbolic marker for the region I call home.

This was a realization I had not had, until I asked my informants, “Does your ethnic background influence your families’ food tradition?” Most students had no idea what their ethnic background was, but because I connected food traditions in my questions, almost every single one of my informants deduced that because their family consumes a great deal of Mexican cuisine and they must be Mexican. These kids are growing up eating Mexican food, as did I.

Ethnic food is a system of communication that offers people a symbolic connection to their culture and homeland\textsuperscript{53}. This connection allows boundaries of regionalism and ethnicity to be crossed using new forms of sociality, as is the case with Mexican foods connection to my identity. Transnational, globalized foodscapes have brought into question the link between ethnic food, ethnicity, and memory requiring a new cultural context in which these concepts can be discussed.

\textsuperscript{52} “Hole in the wall” meaning taco shops that operate in a fast food manner, serving up lots of food, very quickly; an authentic style of Mexican street cuisine.

\textsuperscript{53} For further discussion of this see Sylvia Ferrero, Comida sin par. Consumption of Mexican Food in Los Angeles: “Foodscapes” in a Transnational Consumer Society” (2002)
Using Schollier’s theory⁵⁴ that food plays into identity in two realms, the primary—a stable identity based in the family and community, and in the secondary—a manipulated identity based on institutional aspects for example the politics of becoming vegetarian. I believe, Food as related to the primary identity of community and family is no longer centered around personal ethnic background but is a localized identity focused on globalized foodscapes and cultures in one’s geographic place. Food as related to the secondary identity of the institution or manipulated identity is centered on a feeling of fresh vs. fast food (natural vs. American commodity).

⁵⁴ For further discussion of Schollier’s theories see page 22 of my literature review.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

My story of food runs deep. It has been one of tradition and change, ethnic connections, cultural growth, and self-actualization. My family, like most American families, is a mix of many ethnicities and traditions. On my mother’s side I feel a strong connection to my German and Irish roots. On my father’s side the influences of the Deep South and rural Midwest are apparent. Beyond my family’s ethnic background is a history of food based on the geographic locations of my family members at various times in their lives. The landscapes of their lives are shown through their cooking and understanding of food, as does mine. The table was central in forming my relationship with food. The dining room table in my parents home is a place of warmth. Growing up we ate every dinner together at that table with the exception of Fridays, which was homemade pizza night, sitting on the living room floor, watching old Star Trek episodes on TV. My dinner table was a place of love, of good food, and it was a mandatory event mending any conflicts that occurred during the day. The food served held important symbolism not only for my family’s heritage but also social politics of the moment between my family members. My mother usually cooked the meals when she got home from work in the late afternoon, my father would arrive just in time to sit down at the already set table I had earned a 25 cents for. After September 11th, 2001 a role change occurred in my home. My mother went back to work, and my father became homemaker. We lived on take-out for a while as this shift was difficult but soon my father was expressing his artistic side through his culinary creations. Our family politics have never been so well balanced.

A group of children I will never forget have touched my life. Throughout the research process I have gained insights into the social world of children. This new understanding of children’s reality has caused me to be ultra sensitive to the influences of American culture and their implications on children. The world our culture has created for children is unsustainable. This thesis has attempted to explore how children understand the cultural constructions of food in consumer society, how their understanding of food affects their cultural identity and how these ideas may connect to the rising health problems faced by American children.
Questions are being asked about the situation of children’s health in American. President George W. Bush, mandated that by July 1, 2006 all school districts that participate in the National School Lunch Program have local wellness policies, dictating what the nutritional content label of the food being served in schools must read, as well as how many hours of exercise and classroom health education children receive. This policy has already been put in place in the school where my research was centered. And as I discovered this policy has not changed the messages kids receive that are shaping their relationship with food. Messages that fast food is okay to eat everyday, that the action of eating has no purpose other than to introduce basic nutrients into the body in a fast and efficient manner, and that nutrition is an academic exercise rather than an important aspect of life.

Food is an unavoidable part of our everyday life worlds. As such, food and our relationship to it, needs to be an issue that is addressed by the participants of American culture. A combination of cultural, economic, political, and social influences have changed our relationship to food. The proverbial “apple pie” is no longer something wholesome that embodies the feeling of being American. The colloquial saying, "as American as apple pie" has a very different meaning for children today. While it may seem that this is simply a metaphor usurped, it is the symbolic representation of America that is significant. The rituals of food and implicit messages held within food are under attack by our own culture. This assault has transformed apple pie into a pornographic sex toy; American cuisine has been degraded to homogenized food commodities, the term ‘American food’ now represents a highly rationalized system of producing cheap low quality product, and ‘fast food’ has become the ultimate ‘good to think’ food for our culture.

55 See Appendix F for Forest Grove School District’s wellness policy.
Who are the manufacturers of obesity, I would argue that the school is one. Kids are taught to question the messages in the media, but they don’t question the school and their learning fast food values\textsuperscript{56}, everyday. However, hope has been represented in my findings. Children still define good food as something fresh and wholesome, they have retained the cultural contructions surrounding a proper meal, and they have assimilated other cuisines into their sense of cultural identity.

There is no easy solution to this problem, the symbolism and meaning of food runs deep. Thomas Huxley has set the standard in his article, \textit{A Liberal Education}, he states, “education is the great panacea\textsuperscript{57} for human troubles”. Food and eating within the school is a logical place to approach such social issues. The school is a controlled environment within which knowledge is passed from those who know, to those who are learning. For some students the school is the only controlled environment they have and so the messages they learn there are pivotal to their social and personal development. However, the systems in place in schools leave little time to address the needs of children beyond what’s being tested on.

“I’m sure there has always been some kind of societal expectation that other people will help teach your children. But the other people teaching your children used to be your neighbors, or the man at the grocery store that catches you taking an apple and lectures you on it, makes you put it back, and then goes and tells your mom. And that doesn’t happen as much with the expectation that the school is going to solve all the problems. It makes sense that if you can get to them early they will have more success as an adult. There has to be a reason that

\textsuperscript{56} Fast food values is the idea that children absorb value laden messages through food consumption. The values they obtain from fast foods is that there is an abundant and endless supply of food, eating is primarily about fueling up with the minimal nutrients possible – burning it off and eating some more, fast food is actually food for us, where it comes from and how fresh it is doesn’t matter, better advertising means better food, and avoid work when you can get it fast. For further discussion see Alice Waters article, Fast-food values and Slow Food Values (2005)

\textsuperscript{57} Panacea: a cure all for problems.
you’d need to run interference. So if your running interference to stop something from happening, we only have the kids from 9 am to 3:30 pm, and then they go home! So whatever it is you’re doing here, if it’s totally opposite to what you’re doing here, the parents are the ones who are consistent throughout the kids life. If the parents are saying to them everything they learn in school is a lie, the kids are going to believe that and you can’t really fight against it.” ~ Mrs. White

Requirements cannot be set on children’s lives outside of the school, so we set requirements within it. A problem such as children’s understanding of the cultural construction of food is one that all the power structures involved in children’s lives must address, the family and school alike. Americans tend to approach societal problems by asking what policies can we make, what rules can we put in place, and how can we control the situation. This line of question is not creating change. We need to be asking what has happened in our culture, what is the relationship children have with food, and how do children understand food that is causing this health epidemic. These are the kinds of questions I have asked in my research.

The question is now, will we embrace this new cultural definition and allow are children to grow fat on the ‘all American diet’? Or will we say “no” and begin to address the problems in our culture that have brought us to this point.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


