

Food, class and child 'obesity'

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Introduction

'Obesity' in children

- Intractable, 'wicked' public health, food policy problem
- Multifactorial causation - rapid increase prevalence dovetailed neoliberalism
- Social gradient does not consider class effects
- Parents' food practices under microscope
- Little research considers their food policy experience and solutions



This paper drawn from PhD that explored disconnects between the state and its governance of parents of children with obesity, including the relevance of class. Findings on class are presented. 'Obesity' in children is considered for health implications, and human flourishing.

Example, potential insulin resistance



Acanthosis nigricans

Methodology and study design

Critical policy analysis: qualitative enquiry, eclectic theoretical framework: Marxism Bourdieusian, Gramscian and Foucauldian. Class defined by relations to means of production (Clements and Myles (1994).

Methods: document analysis; 31 semi structured interviews: 6 policymakers, 10 implementers, 15 parents of children with obesity, of whom 11 women and 11 working class (by occupation and postcode); 9 ethnic groups, aged 23-54 years, field notes

Study site: London borough, interface with 'local state'

Purposive sampling, convenience recruitment and snowballing

Audio recorded, transcribed by researcher; Thematic analysis; Nvivo data management.

Findings and discussion

Class presence was powerful. For policymakers and implementers, meanings varied: 'different things to different people' or food and child health as 'class issues' or class 'sits in people's heads'. Despite removal from food policy discourse, class was articulated in describing parents' food practices. There was paradoxical empathy alongside assumptions of food illiteracy.

'Some of us wouldn't look at those foods but maybe we would if we had less money and had less skill...' (Ken, policymaker)

For parents' 'class' was a lived experience. Working class meant you had to work.

Material conditions

Neoliberal working life and unhealthy foodscapes constrained working-class parents' food practices. Parents believed profit is placed before child health. Food literate parents made food compromises, and were denied intrinsically satisfying activities of family life. Division between working and mothers on welfare emerged:

It's what you can afford. Social Class has got nothing to do with it. There are people on benefits in this area who've got a good quality of life with their kids because they are at home and are able to cook. I think it's more the working parents that are suffering and the kids of working parents' (Liz, mum, bus driver)

The 'nanny', symbolic of classed 'time and money' resources, was contrasted to stressed 'work-family' balance:

'They can afford to go out and buy these organics, healthy foods... have nannies that prepare the dinners before they get in ... told the nanny 'make sure you feed them healthily.' But when you're thinking every day, what am I going to cook them? Your money's running low. You've got stresses about bills and everything else. The last thing on your mind is 'what's the healthy option? You can't afford to buy the healthy stuff so you're just going to go for the quick fix' (Leyla, mum, childcare)



Foodscapes

Symbolic violence through foodscapes contributed to keeping working class fixed in place – in social gradient. Compounded by gentrification. Misrecognition of the 'natural order of things' (Topper, 2001) was suggested by young mum Samina: 'kind of cycle...it just goes on' and 'no-one cares'. Some recognised discrimination: unhealthy foods 'dumped' in the community.

'It's keeping the adults on their liquor, the kids on the sweets and takeaways for dinner. It's what we're seeing everyday so all we think about is sweets and drinks. It's like the betting...its' not good'

Affective injury in 'knowing' that working class child health is devalued. Affluent foodscapes described as 'pretty' and 'not life-threatening'



Class differences

Working class parents used middle classed policy language: *regulating, monitoring and discipline*. Reported difference was in

'big difference...in how they eat and how they drink... if I should give my children...orange juice and toast and little bit of cereals. For lunchtime, they have a little bit of fruit, evening time they have a sandwich or...just mostly vegetables, piece of chicken and a little spoon of rice. Then I would be set in a foreign way living like the upper-class people, eat, how they eat their food'. (Lena, mum, adult social care)

Class consciousness

Collectivity of class was voiced in food differences, experiences of material conditions, and collective care for children such as volunteer-led, community cooking classes. Few parents saw a role for the trade unions as argued by researcher and others (Wilkinson 2014). Most thought food policymaking should include parents. For some, power lay with community: 'food revolution'.

Ecological and integrated food policies

Parents' policy solutions included work and welfare reforms, greater control of food industry, affordable healthy foods, redesign highstreets with most fast food outlets replaced by multicultural food eateries, affordable small grocers, foods straight from farm.

Conclusions

- Material conditions constrained parents' capacities in managing child 'obesity'
- These fix working class families in place' - in the social gradient
- Symbolic violence occurs through foodscapes, and 'knowing' profit comes before child health
- The lived effects of class should be considered alongside the social gradient for policy, researchers, and practitioners
- Not considering class food differences, further devalues the working class
- Connecting the food visions of working class parents with policy would support child health
- New 'people-centred' policy direction should involve parents
- An ecological, integrated, emancipatory/non-oppressive approach with political ethic of care is argued for

Limitations

Parents redesign of foodscape may be specific to this ethnically diverse sample.

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