1 Studying eating out

There has been an explosion of social scientific interest in food in the last decade. Nutritionists, social policy advisors, anthropologists, agricultural economists and historians have always studied food habits, though for different reasons. However, before the 1990s general social scientific interest in the practical, social and cultural aspects of food was minimal. For a sociologist, the field consisted of a stuttering debate on the nature of the proper meal and its role in domestic organisation (e.g. Douglas, 1975; Douglas and Nicod, 1974; Murcott, 1983a and 1983b; Charles and Kerr, 1988), a few occasional essays on exceptional behaviour like vegetarianism, health food shopping and children's sweets (Twigg, 1983; Atkinson, 1980; and James, 1990, respectively), and Mennell's (1985) major, largely neglected, historical comparison of the development of food habits in Britain and France. This situation had changed markedly by the time of writing, with the publication of a series of literature surveys and textbooks (e.g. Beardsworth and Kiel, 1997; Bell and Valentine, 1997; Mennell et al., 1992; Wood, 1995) and of research monographs and essays (Caplan, 1997; Fine et al., 1996; Lupton, 1996; Marshall, 1995; Murcott, 1998; Warde, 1997).

One indicator of the growth of interest in food was the Economic and Social Research Council's programme 'The Nation's Diet: the social science of food choice', which began in 1992. We undertook one of the sixteen projects. We designed a survey and undertook semi-structured interviews in order to analyse the contemporary patterns and the symbolic associations of eating out and to relate those patterns to social and demographic characteristics of households. We reasoned that eating out has serious implications for any comprehensive understanding of the nation's diet. Eating out, for instance, throws into sharp relief narrow concerns with food as merely a means of subsistence, for eating out seems to be expanding as a form of entertainment and a means to display taste, status and distinction. Also significant is the willingness of people to swap their private domestic food provisioning arrangements for commercial or communal alternatives. Upon that issue hangs the future of both one of

Britain's largest industries and a major buttress of that troubled institution, the family.

At the outset of this investigation there was almost no systematic social scientific research on the nature and experience of eating out. After the project began the National Food Survey (MAFF, 1995, 39–92) reported for the first time details about eating out in the UK on the basis of its national sample survey. However, it was more concerned with the nutritional than the social aspects of the topic. Previously only highly inaccessible market research reports and occasional historically oriented campaigning books by food connoisseurs (e.g. Driver, 1983) reflected on the practice of eating out. Yet, Britons increasingly consume their food outside the home. As a proportion of food expenditure, that devoted to eating away from home has been increasing since at least the end of the 1950s.

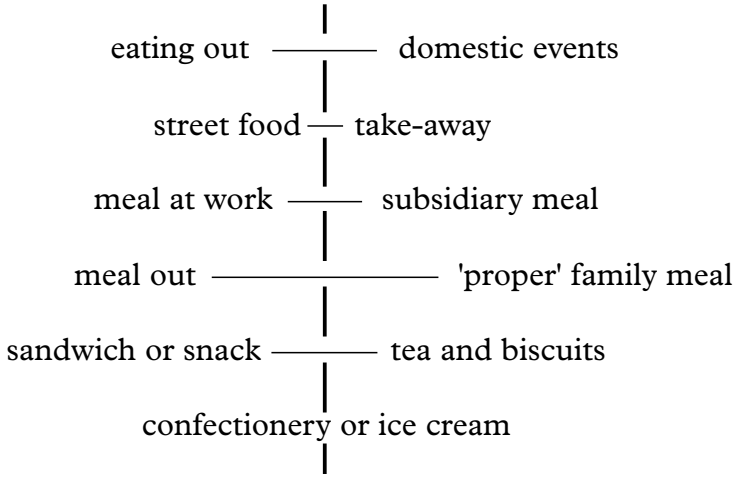
Historical accounts of food provision tend to concentrate either on overall levels of consumption within societies, on questions of poverty and hunger, or on particular foodstuffs, like sugar or tea. Few of the general books on British food habits pay any attention to the commercial provision of meals. Restaurant and café appear very infrequently in the indexes of such works. For example, Burnett (1989) gives a comprehensive overview of changing behaviour in the UK since the Industrial Revolution, showing how differences of class and region influenced types of diet and overall standards of nutrition, and while there are useful short sections on changing patterns of eating out, only a small proportion of a large book is devoted to meals away from home. There is no satisfactory historical account of the catering industry or restaurants, information emerging in passing from Medlik (1972), Mennell (1985), Driver (1983) and Wood (1992b). General histories of food consumption in the USA make more reference to the practice (e.g. Levenstein 1988 and 1993) and, because the habit of buying meals on commercial premises is longer established, America is better served with studies of its historical and geographical diffusion (e.g. Pillsbury, 1990; Zelinsky, 1985). But literature is sparse.

Food and its consumption may be examined at several different levels. Depending upon one's purpose, attention may focus on one or more of the following: nutrients, ingredients, dishes, meals or cuisines. Each poses different kinds of analytic problem and generates different kinds of popular concern. The analytic decomposition of foods into their component nutrients engages biologists, biotechnologists, nutritionists and health professionals. Notions of diets, healthy eating, using food to protect against illness depend on the isolation, measurement and understanding of nutrients. Studies of agricultural production and the economics of the food chain, with concomitant regulations regarding the

preservation and the purity of foodstuffs, direct attention to ingredients. Some of the most politically challenging issues about food production arise from examining specific food items, for example sugar (see Mintz, 1985; Fine et al., 1996). Hitherto, most scholarly attention has been paid to nutrients and ingredients. Work on dishes has been primarily practical, as the basis of training in cooking, whether domestic or professional. The stock in trade of a genre of popular literature, food columns in magazines and cookery books, are recipes giving instruction in how to prepare dishes. When people talk of cooking it usually connotes combining and assembling ingredients to create a dish. Levi-Strauss's (1966) observations about the symbolic significance of different techniques for transforming ingredients into foods – of the differences between roasting, boiling and rotting, for instance – has been a major source of social scientific reflection. Also some attention has been paid to recipes and recipe books (Appadurai, 1988; Tomlinson, 1986; Warde, 1997). By comparison there has been far less work on meals, the most clearly sociological topic because a meal presumes social ordering of dishes, rules and rituals of commensality and forms of companionship. Nor has there been much scholarly analysis of cuisine, the realm of general principles governing what is, and what is not acceptable to eat, the bedrock of general meanings attributed to food and eating in different cultural formations (though see Goody, 1982; Mennell, 1985).

Wood (1995: 112) correctly observed that theoretical claims arising from social scientific food research far outreach current empirical knowledge. More focused and detailed analysis of particular practices is essential for our better understanding of the myriad aspects of food provisioning. We therefore concentrate closely upon one level, the meal, and one of its forms, meals taken away from home. This is essentially a book about *meals out*.

Sociologists and anthropologists in the UK have operated with a definition of the meal which was formulated as a curious mix of everyday meanings and structuralist analysis. Nicod (1980, see also Douglas and Nicod, 1974), defined a meal as 'a "structured event", a social occasion organised by rules prescribing time, place and sequence of actions . . . (and which) . . . is strictly rule bound as to permitted combinations and sequences' (quoted in Marshall, 1995: 266). A snack, by contrast, has no structure. Structured eating events in Britain, Douglas and Nicod suggested, contained similar elements, but with different degrees of elaboration. Their sparse definition provided the basis for an elaborated, and arguably stereotyped, model of the 'family' or 'proper' meal, whose properties were identified in the course of interviews with households first in South Wales, then in Yorkshire (Murcott, 1982, 1983a; Charles and Kerr,



1.1 Eating events: at home and away

1988). As many anthropologists and sociologists have noted, family meals are structured food events particularly important in social and cultural reproduction (Douglas, 1975; DeVault, 1991). Unsurprisingly, then, predictions of their erosion before social trends like commercialisation, informalisation and individualisation have given cause for concern.

Determining whether the habit of eating out is eroding the domestic mode of provision depends very much on how eating out is defined. Prima facie it is the taking of food in some location other than one's own place of residence. In that sense there are a great many eating out events; eating a packet of crisps or fish and chips in the street, as well as a sandwich in the office, a barbecue at a friend's house and an elaborate dinner in a restaurant would count, while returning home with a take-away pizza or a made-up dish from the supermarket would not. Figure 1.1 identifies some of the possible variants.

Analyses of contemporary commercial provision of meals out are mostly restricted to estimates of their economic value and prospects for future investment. Many types of organisation provide food in multifarious forms. Restaurants, bistros and cafés specialise in providing food. But for many others food is not their only service or product – hotels, public houses, hospitals and motorway service stations are only partly concerned with food and estimating the proportion of their income derived from food is hazardous. In addition, the catering industries include businesses whose purpose is not to provide meals on the premises; the fish and chip shop has been included in various different categories in official

statistics over the years. When the economic and social history of the catering trades comes to be written it will not be helped much by official sources. Some indications of the dimensions and trajectory of the industry can be obtained from market research reports, of which there have been a great many in the last twenty years. But they have well recognised limitations: they are commissioned for the purpose of guiding business decisions, mostly exaggerate short-term trends, are not comparable over time, and are also not easily accessible as public documents (Gofton, 1998). Nevertheless they often offer the only available information on the shape and size of particular sectors.

By contrast there is an interesting and expanding literature on the nature of work in the catering industries. Studies of the labour process are comparatively well developed, with a little on chefs and commercial cooking (see Fine, 1995a; Gabriel, 1988; Chivers, 1973) and a considerable amount on how serving staff manage face-to-face relations with their clientele. Ethnography, observation and interviews have been effectively used to map the variety of work activities in different kinds of establishments which have developed over the years. The work of waiters in traditional restaurant settings is examined by Whyte (1948), Mars and Nicod (1984) and Gabriel (1988). Marshall (1986), Crang (1994), again Gabriel (1988) and Sosteric (1996) offer insights into the experience of waiting on in less formal settings, including pubs and theme restaurants, since the 1980s. In addition, work in fast food places has been subject to intense scrutiny as exemplary of alienated, routinised, 'Fordist' labour in the service industries (see Leidner 1993, Reiter, 1991). However, from these we learn comparatively little about the impact upon consumers. We know much more about what waiting staff think of their customers than vice versa.

That most literature is driven by the concerns of the catering industries rather than consumers is not unique to this field. Social science has typically paid far more attention to production than consumption. Reference to the consumer experience is also mostly in terms of its construction or manipulation by producers. A book by Campbell-Smith, *The Meal Experience* (1967), is often credited with formalising the marketing insight that there are many factors which influence customer satisfaction with commercially provided meals. The restaurant should be not just a provider of food but a site of a theatre performance, in which the atmosphere, appeal to sensual perception and the character of service were all key elements. A text for the aspiring restaurateur, it concentrated on aspects over which an owner might exercise control. The degree of power exercised by the provider is one issue of dispute in studies of dining out. Wood (1995: 199) endorses Finkelstein's controversial extended account in *Dining Out* (1989) which attributes considerable power to restaurateurs. Finkelstein's

central thesis is that, in modern restaurants, the decor, service and atmosphere are designed in such a way as to relieve customers of the 'responsibility to shape sociality' (*ibid.*: 5). The regimes of commercial establishments are planned in a way that encourages simulated, rather than genuine, engagement between companions (*ibid.*: 52). Conventional behaviour in restaurants amounts to accepting an 'obligation to give a performance in accord with the normative demands of the circumstances' (*ibid.*: 53). Eating out, she says, is incivil. However, Finkelstein's thesis might be criticised for its scant empirical basis, its construction of customers as passive and misguided, and its indifference to the sub-cultural differences of advanced societies (see further, Martens and Warde, 1997).

Eating out has both practical and symbolic significance. People eat out sometimes out of necessity, sometimes purely for pleasure. Previous research using the British Family Expenditure Survey had suggested that modes of eating out had become a principal form in which social distinction could be expressed through food consumption (see Warde and Tomlinson, 1995). This implied that eating out had considerable social and symbolic significance for some groups, a circumstance making it worthy of study in terms of theoretical debates concerning the expression of social divisions through consumption behaviour and the bases for differential involvement in public and private spheres. Passing reference to eating out in studies of the social division of taste in North America suggest something similar (Erickson, 1991 and 1996; Holt, 1997a). Recent official data and market research reports in the UK indicate that there are social group differences both in the frequency of eating out and with respect to which venues are frequented. Income, age, region, class, gender and household composition all influence access to eating out (e.g. MAFF, 1997). However, there are many sociological questions about variations in practice which could not be answered on the basis of existing materials, hence our empirical study.

Methods of investigation

The empirical research involved in the project was designed to examine the symbolic significance of eating out and the relationship between public eating and domestic cooking. It aimed to describe contemporary patterns and the symbolic associations of eating out and to relate these to socio-demographic characteristics of households, their domestic provisioning of food, diet and taste. A second and separate field of empirical and theoretical controversy, about domestic organisation of households, was also amenable to scrutiny via the investigation of eating out. It was anticipated not only that the composition of households would influence

their eating out behaviour but also that the experience of eating out might influence domestic habits and tastes. Exploration of eating out, besides supplying the first systematic baseline study of a practice accounting for a substantial and increasing part of household food consumption, promised to illuminate many aspects of contemporary social and cultural practice.

Briefly, since methods of data collection and analysis are described in detail in the Appendix, two principal forms of fieldwork were used, semi-structured interviews and a survey. The combination of qualitative and quantitative methods is becoming a more common feature of social scientific inquiry and proved essential for this study (Brannen, 1992). As would be anticipated, the semi-structured interviews provided superior data on the meanings and reasoning associated with eating out. The survey allowed estimation of general patterns among urban populations and the opportunity for statistically based exploration of the association between the social characteristics of respondents and their conduct. The two different techniques proved compatible and the results generally complementary. We use the term 'interviewee' to refer to the people involved at the qualitative stage, and the term 'respondent' to apply to those contacted through the survey.

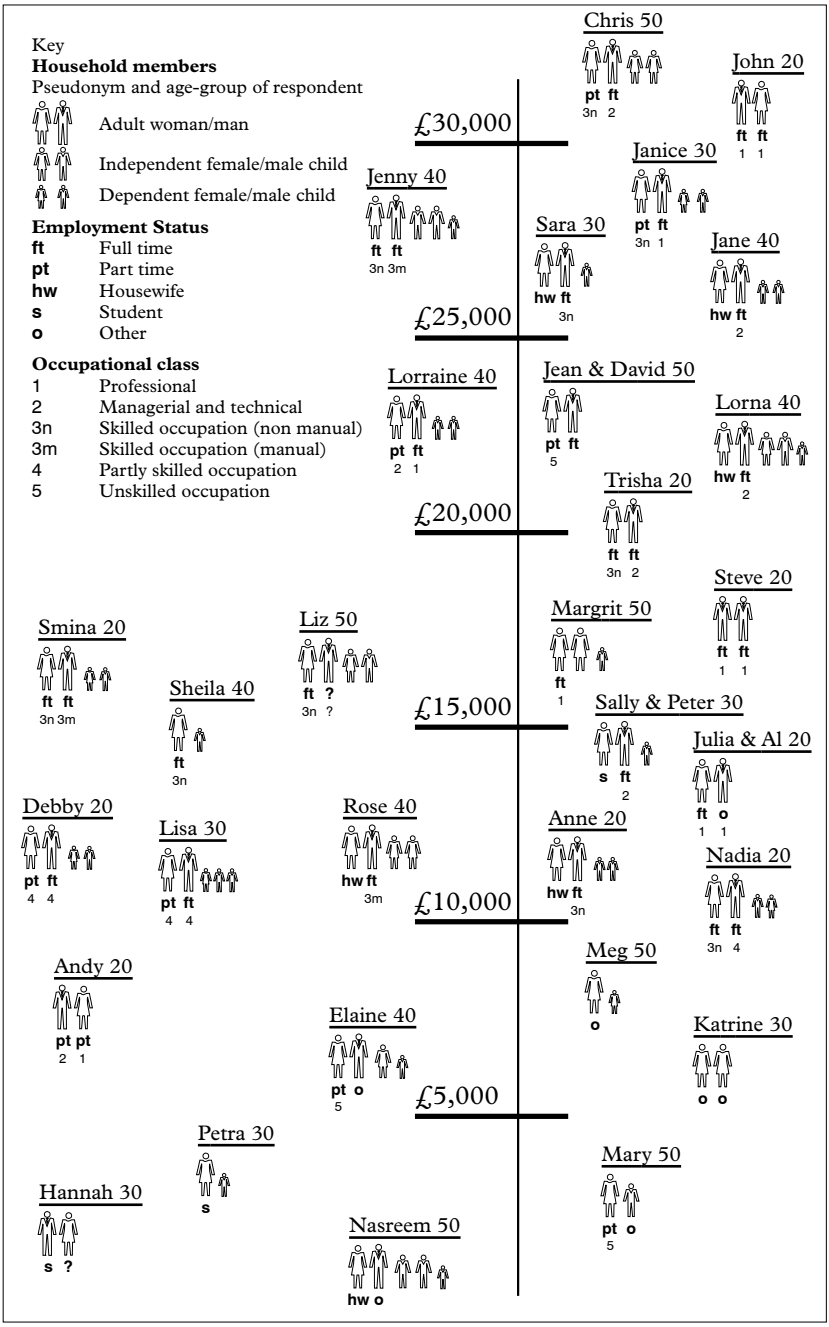
The research design entailed two phases of data collection. In the first, we conducted interviews with thirty-three principal food providers[1] in thirty households in diverse circumstances living in Preston and the surrounding area during the autumn of 1994. Concentration on Preston, a city in Lancashire in north-west England, with a population of 121,000 in 1991, was opportunistic, but we have no reason to think Preston highly unusual in any respect (see Appendix, p.228).

The personal characteristics and household circumstances of each are indicated in Figure 1.2.[2] Interviewees were asked questions about aspects of eating at home including descriptions of household routines and distribution of food preparation tasks. Questions about eating out included the interviewee's understanding of the term, frequency and reasons for using various places and information details about recent eating out experiences. Discussion was wide-ranging around the key topics and not all interviews addressed each topic in the same depth.

In Phase II, 1,001 people were surveyed, using a questionnaire in three cities in England; London, Bristol and Preston. Respondents were

[1] A principal food provider is defined, following the work of DeVault (1991: 22) as 'anyone, man or women, who performed a substantial portion of the feeding work of the household'.

[2] Names of interviewees are pseudonyms, as are the names of all commercial establishments mentioned in the text.



1.2 Social characteristics of interviewees

engaged face-to-face in their own homes, interviews lasting on average between thirty and thirty-five minutes. Questions were asked to ascertain frequency of eating out, types of outlet visited, attitudes to eating out, extensive detail about the nature of the most recent meal eaten away from home and rudimentary information about domestic routines. Socio-demographic data was also elicited in order to explore variation by class, income, age, gender, education, place of residence, and so forth.[3]

The cities were chosen to offer contrasts of socio-demographic composition and, putatively, cultural ambience. Preston was included partly so that we might compare the survey findings with the evidence of the qualitative interviews, partly as representing a large northern free-standing city without any particularly eccentric characteristics. London was selected in anticipation that its unique features, including its system of supply, would prompt distinctive consumption behaviour, and the two sub-divisions were chosen to illustrate potential differences between central and suburban areas of the metropolis. Bristol was selected as an example of a southern, non-metropolitan city with some claim to be culturally heterogeneous. Since no three cities could be representative of all others in England, these sites were deemed as satisfactory as any. Despite not being a nationally random sample, there is no reason to consider the survey biased in any particular way as a basis for an initial portrait of urban English practice. The survey was undertaken in April 1995 and was administered to a quota sample which matched respondents to the overall population of diverse local sub-areas of the cities by age, sex, ethnicity, class and employment status.

Overall, our estimates of current behaviour, based on what people say they do, are derived from data which are more reliable and representative than those which sustain popular and media speculation about eating out. The use of two different methods gives us extra confidence that we can describe with unprecedented accuracy the range of experience of people eating out in England. Our complex data also give us a fair means to evaluate claims emanating from recent social theory about consumption and consumer culture.

Theories and themes

A service provisioning approach to consumption

We approach eating out as a case study of consumption and seek to develop sociological perspectives in the field. Recent sociology of consumption has

[3] The data from the survey is lodged at the ESRC Data Archive at Essex University, which holds copies of the questionnaire and the associated technical report from Public Attitudes Survey, who conducted the survey.

focused particularly on the consequences of the intensification of consumer culture and the commodification of services previously supplied by the state or household. Despite some significant theoretical developments like Featherstone's (1991) nuanced incorporation of insights from postmodernist speculation within a cultural studies tradition and Fine and Leopold's (1993) exposition of a 'systems of provision' approach deriving from political economy, there remains a need to develop more fully an integrated understanding of the relationship between consumption and production. Arguably, the further theoretical development of the sociology of consumption requires experimentation with new heuristic frameworks as well as more empirical case studies (Warde, 1996).

We adopt a 'service provisioning' framework because we believe that it is the most effective way to connect analytically processes of production and consumption (Warde, 1992). The essence of the approach, which is elaborated in the introductions to Parts I – IV, is to distinguish between the phases of production – consumption cycles involved in the delivery of services and to identify different modes of service provision. We propose that all items consumed, whether goods or services, incorporate a residue of labour and that the form of the labour affects the meaning and status of the product. The vast majority of goods now arrive as commodities, sold in the market and produced by wage labour. But services are provided from many sources, not just through the market by commercial firms, but also by the state, by household members, and by friends and non-resident kin. Such labour is often unpaid. These different modes of provision entail different relationships between producer and consumer, a proposition that might be supported, for example, by reflection on how complaints are lodged. It is also corroborated by consideration of the social relationships that entitle the consumer to receive such services. Typically, money, citizenship, family obligation and mutual reciprocity govern access to services produced in the different modes. A further key element of service provision is its manner of delivery. As regards eating out, the organisation of service (for example, formal, casual or self-service) and the manner in which interactions between server and served are managed are essential defining aspects of the occasion. The fourth element in a production-consumption cycle concerns the experience of final consumption, the feelings of gratification or discontent which the consumer derives before, during and after the event itself. A phase rarely reflected upon in any detail, we argue that it is central to appreciating the social significance of consumption practices like eating out. This framework permits analysis of key features of any consumption practice and brings to the fore some particularly important contemporary social processes.