Childhood

http://chd.sagepub.com

Semantic Provisioning of Children's Food: Commerce, care and maternal practice

Daniel Thomas Cook

Childhood 2009; 16; 317
DOI: 10.1177/0907568209335313

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://chd.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/16/3/317

Published by:

http://www.sagepublications.com

On behalf of:

Norwegian Centre for Child Research

Additional services and information for *Childhood* can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://chd.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://chd.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

Citations http://chd.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/16/3/317

Downloaded from http://chd.sagepub.com at RUTGERS UNIV on August 19, 2009

SEMANTIC PROVISIONING OF CHILDREN'S FOOD
Commerce, care and maternal practice

DANIEL THOMAS COOK
Rutgers University–Camden, USA

Keywords:
care, children, consumption, food, motherhood, provisioning

Mailing address:
Daniel Thomas Cook
Rutgers University, Department of Childhood Studies, Department of Sociology, 405–7 Cooper Street, Camden, NJ 08102, USA.
[email: dtcook@camden.rutgers.edu]

Childhood Vol. 16(3): 317–334
© The Author(s), 2009. Reprints and permissions: http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
http://chd.sagepub.com
DOI: 10.1177/0907568209335313

Drawing upon in-depth interviews with mothers in the US about feeding their young children, this article examines how consumer culture – broadly construed – constitutes part of the indispensable context of mothering practices. The argument put forward is that mothers not only provide food and sustenance for their children, but necessarily encounter, engage with and make use of commercial meanings of foodstuffs as part and parcel of the caring work they accomplish while providing food and meals. The concept of 'semantic provisioning' is meant to capture the meaning-making labor of mothers as it arises in sometimes contentious negotiations with children over 'proper' and 'appropriate' foodstuffs and meals. The approach offered seeks to demonstrate how commerce, sentiment, caring and children's subjectivities interweave at the level of practice.

Pecuniary value and market relations figure regularly and intimately in the practices and self-understandings of contemporary American mothers. Mothers attend to, engage with and involve themselves in commercial life integrating 'consumption', in a general sense, into ways of being a mother and of caring for children. To affix motherhood to commercial life in this way is not to affirm the simple thesis that motherhood has been or is being commodified, or that some kind of 'commodity frontier' (Hochschild, 2003) is encroaching upon the home and family. Indeed, that much is evident to mothers, scholars and marketers (Coffey et al., 2006; Cook, 1995; Seiter, 1993). By bringing the two together I mean to assert that much of contemporary motherhood cannot usefully be understood apart from commercial life and its extensions. We cannot 'know' motherhood without 'knowing' the consumer/commercial contexts of mothers' lives and, by direct implication, the commercial lives and contexts of children and childhood.

In claiming the inseparability of consumption, childhood and motherhood, I am aligning myself with a segment of social thought that challenges economistic thinking that continues to dominate a good deal of social

Downloaded from http://chd.sagepub.com at RUTGERS UNIV on August 19, 2009

research. Best represented by the recent work of Viviana Zelizer (2005), the general, analytic thrust of this approach seeks to detail the various dynamics that pertain between economic life and sentimental/emotional life (see also Clarke, 2004; Dorow, 2002). Rather than discounting the world of markets, production and consumption as being incommensurable with sentiment and intimacy – what Zelizer (2005) calls the 'hostile worlds' view – the idea is to fuse together traditionally separated arenas of existence (e.g. home/work; family/economy; emotion/rationality).

My concern here centers on engaging the problematics arising from the economy–culture–meaning–sentiment nexus by way of examining motherhood – or rather, aspects or moments of mothering – as embedded in and informed by consumer practice, entangled as it is with children's food, subjectivities and desires. I am in full agreement with Ellen Seiter, who states that 'contemporary parenthood is always and already embedded in consumerism' (Seiter, 1993: 3). Consumption forms a significant context for mothering in large part because children and childhood are likewise embedded in commercial life, often from the outset of their existence (Clarke, 2004), particularly in North American and global North contexts. Engagement with and in the world of goods, moreover, extends beyond the store aisle and beyond the moment of technical exchange at the cashier's till. Through acts of provisioning – and specifically what I call semantic provisioning – mothers remain active and productive in the commercial lives of their children well after a good has been purchased.

In the following discussion, I give dimension to and expand upon these notions and problems through an examination of narratives proffered by four employed US mothers regarding the ways they feed and think about feeding their children. Taken from interviews, these mothers' reports provide an entrée into some of the everyday interplay between the provisioning of food, the policing of nutrition, the enactment of care and encounters with consumer culture in its various forms and venues. Key insights arising from this discussion focus on understanding the necessity of including the world of consumption directly and immediately into the context of mothering, and grasping the importance of acknowledging the play and force of children's subjectivities in relation to practices of care (Kaplan, 2000). Prior to presenting the interview material, I briefly discuss some research and thinking about mothers, children and consumer culture.

A missing child?

Arlie Hochschild (2003) has recently addressed commercialization, motherhood, home and intimate life, positing a 'commodity frontier' encroaching upon the family and the home. With the increasing 'outsourcing' to the marketplace of what used to be household tasks like cleaning and preparing full meals, Hochschild notes that the American family is facing a 'deficit of care'

Downloaded from http://chd.sagepub.com at RUTGERS UNIV on August 19, 2009

as the home continues to be configured as a unit of consumption (Hochschild, 2003: 35–9). Some families, she notes in another publication (Hochschild, 2005), 'rent' mothers – i.e. pay for the some household services traditionally associated with mothers – and some hire people to perform tasks like putting together a family's photographs into album. Hochschild examines these and other emergent practices in terms of how people 'jump over', 'borrow across' or 'listen through' what she calls the 'wall between market and non-market life' so as to negotiate appropriate feelings in the context of commercialized arrangements.

The insights Hochschild offers regarding the interplay between commercialized services, emotions and changing notions of intimate home life are, as is typical of her scholarship, eye-opening and provocative. Yet, her overall project and problem suffer from the use of the language of 'frontier' and the metaphor of a 'wall'. The imagery deployed here reaffirms the divisions and boundaries under scrutiny to the extent that they continue to demarcate the very divides that require reconceptualization. In this view, 'home' and 'sentimental life' remain outside of and categorically antagonistic to 'the market'.

To be sure, Hochschild's treatment focuses strongly on how to rethink home and family and their relationship to the market. But, by presenting the problem structure as one where 'the market' or 'commercialization' are so easily identifiable with the exchange of money for services, she ultimately reifies and reinforces an almost modernist division between home and market, offering something akin to a Parsonian rendition of a dual transaction between these two, presumably distinguishable, realms of life. Some questions arise: Why does this 'wall' or 'frontier' divide economic from non-economic as opposed to, say, dividing intimate from non-intimate, or public from private life? Why not posit an 'intimacy frontier' encroaching upon economic life? Durkheim (1915), after all, argued that ritual interdictions are put in place to keep the *sacred* from making incursions on the profane, not the other way around.

In *Feeding the Family* (1991), DeVault argues that women, in the activities of shopping for, preparing and cooking food, accomplish something beyond simply providing sustenance and nourishment. Based on interviews with mothers and wives, she discusses how women actively produce the family through 'thoughtful coordination and interpersonal work', which serves to 'maintain the kind of group life we think of as a family' (DeVault, 1991: 39). In the very acts of considering and responding to the personal needs and preferences of family members, women's activities demonstrate the importance of food and meals in the expressive life of the family (DeVault, 1991: 39–41).

Shopping, for DeVault, is part and parcel of the caring work a woman does when she is producing the family as it 'supports the production of meaningful patterns of household life by negotiating connections between household and market' (DeVault, 1991: 59). The thoughtful consideration of

Downloaded from http://chd.sagepub.com at RUTGERS UNIV on August 19, 2009

tastes and preferences that go into a meal often takes place in the food aisle of the grocery store (see also Phillips, 2008). Continuous and contiguous with the home, the marketplace for DeVault provides a context for the provisioning of food, i.e. for the labor required to turn the generalized purchased products into specialized items for the family (DeVault, 1991: 66–70).

DeVault's analysis does well in demonstrating the avenues traversed between household and market, but in so doing she, in ways similar to Hochschild, reaffirms that modernist division, particularly in her treatment of provisioning. In setting the 'context' for home provision, the market seems to 'enter' the household rarely, and only as an intruder. When women make meals and thus produce family, it appears as though the market all but disappears, with little mention of brand names, celebrities, characters or television shows reported by women.[1] One gets a sense from DeVault that the home still serves as something of an emotional haven from a cold, calculating world of commerce, particularly through women's caring work of provisioning (see also Warde, 1992, 1997: 126–54).[2]

I empathize greatly with the difficulty of attempting to transcend or otherwise reimagine the relationship between two arenas, spheres or 'worlds' that have been dichotomized and redichotomized in social thought for quite a long time (Hochschild, 2005: 80–1; Zelizer, 2005). The preferable point of departure, as discussed earlier, centers on seeing motherhood and childhood as enmeshed in economic and specifically commercial–consumer relations and arrangements from the outset – not as separated by a wall or frontier boundary. Such an approach works toward removing economic presumptions from determining the terms of the analysis, a goal shared by many including, most directly, Zelizer (2005).

What is missing in these discussions – to different extents and in different ways – is, surprisingly, studied attention to children and childhood. Zelizer, the author of what I consider a latter-day sociological classic, *Pricing the Priceless Child* (1985), nevertheless gives children and childhood the short shrift in her recent work (2005), but curiously not in other recent statements (Zelizer, 2002). Devoting only about five pages specifically to 'kids' consumption' in *The Purchase of Intimacy* (Zelizer, 2005: 236–40), children seem to be something of an afterthought to her larger project, almost an aside in a chapter on 'household consumption'. For Hochschild, children are, for the most part, implied rather than explicitly addressed in her discussions of the home and family (Hochschild, 2003, 2005). They are present almost as if by definition instead of by purposeful commission.

Children must be recognized as actors who are significantly and multiply involved in the construction and constitution of family life (Kaplan, 2000) in order to appreciate, analytically and practically, the interplay between motherhood, commercial value and sentiment. Mothers deal with not simply the market or economic side of consumption. They are involved with intuiting, acknowledging and adjudicating children's desires on a daily, sometimes

Downloaded from http://chd.sagepub.com at RUTGERS UNIV on August 19, 2009

hourly, basis. These desires and their expressions, regardless of their specific object or content, nevertheless regularly implicate the world of goods and consumption (Clarke, 2004). Basic requirements like love, companionship, learning/education, sleeping and eating will in some way eventually require some sort of commercial involvement on the part of parents. A hungry child is most often fed with purchased food or food made out of purchased components; a restless child may be given toys or sat in front of a television.

Here, I continue to push the line of thinking that acknowledges the extent to which parental caring practices entail engagement with the commercial world in some manner – with its imagery and meanings as well as material things. I do so by situating children's subjectivities and agency, particularly as they arise as expressions of desire in mothers' narratives, squarely in the analysis and context of mothering.

Research context and considerations

My intent centered on gaining insight into how mothers of young children, approximately ages two through eight, thought about and felt about everyday practices of feeding their children. Between 2004 and 2006, I interviewed mothers who were employed either outside or inside the home, and those laboring exclusively as 'stay-at-home moms'. My initial contacts arose from soliciting interviewees through an online mothers' group consisting of employees at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana. A total of 23 mothers were interviewed, some by way of snowball sampling of these mothers, who were not professors, and others through personal contacts in Chicago. Most interviews were conducted face-to-face and some by telephone when convenient or necessary.

The majority of the women were white and could be described as professional or middle-class. Fourteen worked outside the home either full- or part-time. Five stayed at home as full-time mothers; four had employment that allowed them to work from home. At least five women could be considered working class by profession, although several others indicated their family origins when discussing their father's and/or mother's occupation or life circumstances when growing up. One was Filipino who worked more than full-time, one an African-American woman who was training to be a nurse and a third, a white woman of Polish descent who worked as a nurse in a hospital.

I presented my topic and intentions as wanting to get to know what they, as mothers, do on a day-to-day basis when it comes to feeding their children. The interviews were semi-structured and open-ended (McCracken, 1988; Rubin and Rubin, 2005). Most often I asked about daily routines for different meals, times of day and times of year (school and non-school) focusing on their knowledge and actions in the home. We discussed such things as beliefs

Downloaded from http://chd.sagepub.com at RUTGERS UNIV on August 19, 2009

about food and nutrition, the pleasures and anxieties of being a mother and children's preferences, patterns and foibles.

Semantic provisioning

As DeVault and others make clear, 'provisioning' generally refers to activities which interweave 'market activity' proper (i.e. purchasing) with social-emotional ends and contexts like caring and providing for family members, with an emphasis on how women's efforts transform purchased goods into meals thereby creating and sustaining 'family'. Power (2004: 6) refers to 'social provisioning' to call attention to the 'interdependent social processes' of economic activity and away from assumptions regarding simple pecuniary pursuits done for individualistic reasons. Neysmith and Reitsma-Street (2005: 383) see provisioning as 'the work of securing resources and providing the necessities of life to those for whom one has relationships of responsibility'. In different vein, Warde (1992, 1997) identified four modes of provision – market, state, household and communal – each of which involved different kinds of social relations, manners of delivery and experiences of consumption (i.e. as a customer, citizen, kin or friend; see also Southerton, 2006).

The mothers I interviewed and discuss in the following sections enacted a different kind of provisioning than that related directly to shopping and preparation, engaging in what I am calling 'semantic provisioning'. Semantic provisioning refers to the ways in which caretakers attend to, create, negotiate and act upon the social meaning of goods. Mothers – like anyone else – necessarily encounter and deal with the meanings of things, including commercially generated meanings, in conjunction with functional, use values (if these can be usefully separated). In the course of caring for others, these meanings require attention and often negotiation as they are part and parcel of the activities at hand – in this case eating food and sharing meals.

The point of provisioning usually is to provide things for others' use and perhaps for their pleasure, but the 'things' provided are not self-evident in terms of their social meaning. Caregivers must make distinctions in the process of creating and negotiating meaning, distinctions which necessarily discern 'good' from 'bad' and 'appropriate' from 'inappropriate' food and meals (see Barthes, 1997; Douglas, 1997), often in conflict with children's definitions (James, 1979; Kaplan, 2000). The acts of definition do not necessarily speak to children's (or mother's) pleasure, but to the relationship being negotiated between provider and providee.

In semantic provisioning, as well, what is provided in addition to specific meanings of specific things are larger, culturally inflected categories of the 'field' (Bourdieu, 1993) in question. These categories speak to questions of, for instance, what or when is a 'meal', a 'snack' or a 'treat', or what is 'healthy' or not. Hence, I employ the term 'semantic provisioning' precisely

Downloaded from http://chd.sagepub.com at RUTGERS UNIV on August 19, 2009

to identify the uses of language in the negotiation and creation of meaning of foodstuffs and meals.

Four mothers

I have chosen to present the stories of four mothers in some depth instead of identifying themes across a larger number of interviewees and then extracting quotes to support or illustrate a particular theme. The point here is to situate their narratives and practices in the context of their lives and activities as mothers. I make no claim that the experiences of these four mothers exhaustively represent some cross-section of mothering practices. The limited geographical area involved, the age of the mothers and their status as employed all contribute to specifying their social locations and practices. Rather, I chose these stories to gain a sense of the difference, depth and overlap of the various mothering strategies at work and to illustrate how semantic provisioning, children's desires and commercial culture intermingle in everyday caring practices.

The overriding preoccupation with the mothers I interviewed centered, unsurprisingly, on facilitating a healthy, nutritious alimentary life for their children. Notions of exactly what comprises 'healthy' foods or meals and what makes one thing 'nutritious' or not differed to some degree among the mothers, despite their relatively homogeneous social profiles. Nutrition and health emerged as an ongoing accomplishment or aspiration – something that rarely occurs on its own, requiring some level of intervention on the mother's part. Similar in temperament to Murphy's (2007) findings, mothers identified the children themselves – their wants and desires – as posing immediate and significant obstacles to their own health and nutrition. The focus of these mothers' emotional, physical and semantic labor thus centered on grappling with children's subjectivities and agency at any age.

Mary

Mary works nearly full-time in a professional capacity at the University of Illinois in Urbana. Thirty-four years old with two daughters aged six and four at the time of the interview, Mary is able to work at home some days and has flexibility in terms of her time spent at the office to accommodate her caring duties. She describes the difficulty in providing for her children:

> I would watch [other] kids eating hot dogs or macaroni and cheese and think 'Oh, God. I'd never feed that to my kids'. That's just awful, you know. I can't believe that that could be someone's sustenance. And then you look and you're like 'Oh, my God. My kids are eating mac and cheese for the third day in a row'. I mean, what have I done wrong here?
>
> I don't think it's unusual, based on talking to other parents. But kids go through this sort of one-phase . . . peanut butter and jelly, hot dogs, macaroni and cheese, pizza, whatever it is. And eat one thing . . . for a while my kids were eating oatmeal

Downloaded from http://chd.sagepub.com at RUTGERS UNIV on August 19, 2009

everyday and I thought 'Great . . . they're eating oatmeal everyday. I feel really good about this'.

Here Mary alternates between dread and delight about her children's choices. She vacillates on the question of her influence on their choices, at one point blaming herself for their macaroni and cheese fixation, at another looking to other families for a sense of normalcy and at yet another point expressing some satisfaction that oatmeal had taken over as a favorite, albeit briefly. But Mary does not seem to take credit for their 'good choices', only their 'bad' ones.

When asked if she felt their food choices were out of her control, she first said yes and then added that this had to do with 'what you put in front of them'. Mary believes that 'left to their own devices, children will . . . probably make a poor food choice'. Some days, she explained, she is more 'heavy handed' than others, requiring that they eat 'something new' or something 'good for them' before they leave the house. Other days, she admits being too weary to battle and pleads simply for them to have something 'good'.

She thus tries to give the children fewer options:

I can't give them a choice, you know. 'It's a banana or nothing'. We do things like 'You cannot have a treat (treat defined as fruit roll-up or something that comes in a prepackaged . . . whatever) until you eat your dinner'.

Part of what Mary attempts to provide, part of the provisioning of foodstuffs, includes definitions and categories of kinds of foods – a treat vs. dinner. The point it seems is to get across a 'proper' (i.e. adult) sense of the difference between everyday, sustenance foods and those which may be pleasurable and desirable to her daughters but do not necessarily offer much nutrition (see Alams, 2006). A 'treat' here stands as something special or apart from everyday food as it is offered as a reward for eating or attempting to eat 'something nutritious' (see Miller, 1998).

Defining the boundaries around a 'treat' works both for and against Mary's efforts. For one thing, the images and meanings provided by marketing can blur the kinds of boundaries she wants to enforce and make steadfast. She relates, for instance, how a yogurt package with the licensed Shrek character on it enticed her children to request certain flavors. When the promotion was over, however, she learned that her daughters only wanted the packages adorned with the character and not the very same yogurt, despite her pleading that the content and flavors were the same as before. The difficulty in enforcing the food/treat division is exacerbated by some companies, according to Mary, which have 'gotten good at disguising' treats as snacks, like a Rice Krispies treat which has 'nothing nutritious' about it.

In response to this battle with commercial meanings, Mary admits to a bit a of deception, calling soy hotdogs by the brand name, Ballparks (made of meat), to make them 'more attractive' because 'it sounds a little better'. Her

Downloaded from http://chd.sagepub.com at RUTGERS UNIV on August 19, 2009

motivation and, one presumes, justification for deceit resides in the attempt to put beneficial things into her daughters' systems, by hook or by crook.

She relates the following story:

> You try to give a healthy alternative and they sniff it out every single time. . . . For a while I would give them Nutrigrain bars. . . . Certainly better than a Snickers bar or whatever. And I call them 'Mommy candy bars'. 'You can have Mommy candy bars. That's a treat' and they thought it was a treat. Well, then they learned that that was a breakfast bar and had been duped for a year by mom.

Mary uses the children's categories and their understandings of the meanings and references of the commercial world of foodstuffs in an attempt to accomplish significant tasks that make up her understanding of mothering.

She seems to be involved in an intricate game of bait-and-switch with her children. This is the obverse action of what Allison James (1979) discovered regarding British children's definitions of 'ket' vs 'adult' food whereby the children countered adult definitions with their own. Mary realizes that their food choices, especially for the daughter now in kindergarten, are becoming out of her control and that she will exert decreasing influence as they get older and spend more time with peers. Her hope is that her children will learn what 'good, real food' is and her efforts in this manner have been to establish categorical understandings.

Kim

Also a full-time professional at the University of Illinois, Kim's approach differs in some key ways from Mary's when it comes to feeding her two daughters, who were six and three-and-a-half at the time of the interview. The girls exhibit the fickle/rigid pattern that seems typical of many young children:

> They'll get on kicks, I mean, it was a Fruit Loops kick for two months solid with Jenna and then all of a sudden, one day, it was Rice Krispies . . . we've learned not to try too many different things. They'll like a hamburger. [But] they don't like our hamburgers on the grill for, like, dinner but they love McDonald's hamburgers.

They often do not like the food that Kim fixes for herself and her husband:

> I love stir-fry and when we make stir-fry, they're not gonna eat it . . . . I just will either make some macaroni or some other thing that they'll usually eat. . . . Then they got used to it [Easy Mac brand macaroni and cheese] really quick and now that's all they really know. That's the only kind I'll get.

The girls' tastes and preferences set the context for family meals and she and her husband adjusted accordingly, i.e. they learned what not to make.

The centrality of her children's subjectivities notwithstanding, Kim endeavors to counter their resistance to novelty and to what she considers healthy foods. Frustrated with cooking things that the girls then refuse to eat, she instituted a 'three-bite-rule' whereby they must take three bites of

Downloaded from http://chd.sagepub.com at RUTGERS UNIV on August 19, 2009

something to see if they like it before going on to other things. Kim, now 42, wants to avoid making food and meals a test of wills:

> I don't want them to have a battle with food. I want them to enjoy it and I feel like if you get enough of the good stuff then it balances with the other stuff, the treats and things. . . . I try not to get into the whole dessert . . . like, clean your plate then you can have dessert . . . because then it almost becomes like a forbidden thing.

Whereas Mary needed to limit her children's choices, Kim seeks to encourage making choices through a limited form of coercion. It is an open coercion, part of the explicit rules of eating in her household.

Kim accomplishes the semantic positioning of food and meals for her daughters in the ways she verbally situates all foods, initially at least, as equal to one another in the sense that they cannot be discounted by her children as undesirable until they have taken their three bites. Here branded, prepared and processed foods can stand alongside homecooked meals. The emphasis is on the child's choice: 'I want them to enjoy and not feel they have to hide food from me. I want them to feel like they can have anything they want'. What may appear to be 'indulgence' can be understood, in context, as providing the meaning of food along with the substance.

Carole

Carole comes from a family of five girls whose father worked for the police department and whose mother stayed home with them in a traditional, working-class neighborhood on the Southwest Side of Chicago. Thirty-three years old, married and living in a Chicago suburb, she now works outside the home at a professional job three days a week. At the time of the telephone interview, Carole had three children, ages seven, five and three with her husband, Bob, who works as an elevator constructor.

During workdays, when she commutes one hour each way, Carole's sister takes the children two days a week and a babysitter watches them the other day. She accepts her inability to affect her children's eating when she is at work, particularly the day when the babysitter is in charge:

> It's really out of my control . . . I'll ask the kids 'What did you have for lunch?' and it usually consists of 'Oh we had French fries and a frosty' (*laughing*). And I'm like 'I need to talk to her about that'.

She 'doesn't even ask' what was served for lunch the days her sister is in charge, in part because she feels she can compensate a 'junk lunch' with a 'good dinner'. She noted that her oldest has never had anything but peanut butter and jelly sandwiches in her lunch for all of first and second grade and 'she's fine with it'.

In comparison with other mothers interviewed, Carole does not seem concerned about her children's minute, moment-to-moment food intake or about the variety in their diet, feeling no need to monitor it to any great extent.

Downloaded from http://chd.sagepub.com at RUTGERS UNIV on August 19, 2009

When asked about what they might have during the days she is not around, she listed things like peanut butter and jelly or ham sandwiches, canned soups and various fruits in addition to 'snacky things' like Goldfish, granola bars, Chips A'hoy cookies, Oreos cookies and Pringles potato chips.

Noting that her children rarely request things before going grocery shopping, she takes the struggle in the supermarket aisle as a given:

> That's a constant. First thing you walk in the door they want quarters for the gum ball machine. . . . And yeah of course they're picking 10 things off the shelves. I have a rule that they don't pull things off the shelf . . . and my little one always does it. And I'm in the store going 'If you pull things off the shelves then you can't come to the store with them anymore'. And it usually ends up to be that each one of them gets to pick something out.

Carole will not allow them to have Lunchables snack lunches, which her daughter often requests because the 'kids at school' have them, as they are 'so processed'.

The allure of media characters on cereals and other food packaging is also taken as given by Carole. She reports that in the supermarket 'they fight about which one we're gonna get. I usually end up with each one getting their own box of characters that they like'. At one point the kids became infatuated with SpongeBob SquarePants string cheese. 'But I've broken them of that habit because I just stopped buying them and got the regular ones'.

It became evident during our conversation that the focus of Carole's semantic labor was not so much on defining specific foods as good or bad for them, or about media characters, as it was on their relationship with her and on 'family' and on 'structure'. Carole and Bob are clearly in charge, and they make no apology for being strict. Unlike the reports of other mothers – many of whom explicitly denied that their husbands or partners had any significant involvement with feeding the children – Bob evidently has a say in how they organize meals, as he piped into the conversation from the background:

> . . . we don't make any special courses for anybody because they don't like something. If they don't like it . . . [HUSBAND BOB SPEAKING IN BACKGROUND: 'We're old school' (*laughter*)] Yeah, we're old school. We tell them they have to eat it, eat some of it, and go hungry if they don't. 'Cause we'll have something they like tomorrow.

Carole and Bob enforce a 'no TV rule' during dinner, where they try to get each person to talk about their day. Part of the structure Carole seeks to instill revolves around making sure that the children eat their vegetables, which is a requirement for dinners. She has one of them choose the vegetable for the meal and feels that the lessons are penetrating as her oldest now asks if she can be 'excused' from the table. She admits to offering ice cream occasionally as a reward for eating the vegetables.

Downloaded from http://chd.sagepub.com at RUTGERS UNIV on August 19, 2009

But, at the time of the interview, she was having standoffs with her youngest:

> . . . she doesn't want to eat her vegetables. And will get up with the other two and I'll tell her to sit back down. . . . She'll tell me 'yay, you can't come in my room anymore' because I made her eat her vegetables. . . . Or she'll tell me 'I'll lock my door on you'. And I tell her 'I'll take the door off and you won't have a door' (*laughing*).

Carole is careful to avoid 'tailor[ing] meals to them', which requires enforcing dinner rules to the point of extended struggles.

She sees providing structure in meals as a deep theme in her parenting strategy:

> *Carole:* It seems like we give our kids so much leeway and so much individuality that they start to not understand structure.
>
> *Interviewer:* And so you feel that the meal part is definitely an important way to get structure?
>
> *Carole:* Yeah, to let them know that there's rules and you know, 'we want you to eat like this because it's healthy.' Yeah.
>
> *Interviewer:* And what parts of their lives or other kids' lives do you see there not being as much structure as there could be?
>
> *Carole:* Um, well we have friends that she makes the dinner and then she makes the hot dog for her daughter because her daughter doesn't eat stuff. And that to me is just a waste of time. And it's just a bad habit. If you break the girl of it and not continue to feed into the bad habit, she would probably learn to eat other foods and be fine with it.

The extended quote here offers a flavor of Carole and her husband's approach. It is a bit striking to hear an unqualified view that a child needs to be 'broken' of a habit. Such language is rarely, if ever, heard in middle-class circles. It conjures images of an earlier era of adult/parent absolutism. They are admittedly 'old school'. Yet, Carole sometimes bargains with them to eat vegetables and appeases them with treats during shopping trips.

The desired 'message' or 'meaning' surrounding food and meals is about parental authority. The 'vegetables' at issue with her daughter reside in material and semantic opposition to 'kid foods' her daughter wants, like cookies, macaroni and cheese and 'character driven' foods. As well, they serve as a symbol of hers and Bob's authority to define kid vs. adult, appropriate vs inappropriate. It is understood as a loving, caring authority necessary to counter the bad habits that come with child-centered pampering, like what her friend exhibits. Carole actively undermines and transforms the commercial meanings and associations of 'kids' foods' by fiat. Yet, children's subjectivities here remain central to mothering and to meals, not as something to be indulged, but rather as forces with which to be reckoned.

Rosie

A 31-year-old mother of four children, Rosie works as a waitress on the Southwest Side of Chicago. I became acquainted with her as a regular patron

Downloaded from http://chd.sagepub.com at RUTGERS UNIV on August 19, 2009

of the restaurant where I would go to do a little reading or to correct student exams. She would freely talk about her hectic home life and was curious about what I was 'always reading' at the table. Eventually, I asked her if she'd be interested in being interviewed. One day we sat at a booth after her shift for about an hour.

She has an eight-year-old girl, boys who are five and two, and an 11-month-old girl. Only the two youngest live with her. 'One hundred percent Filipino', Rosie works six days a week from between 8- and 12-hour shifts, estimating that she averages around 58 hours a week. Her husband, who is Mexican, works five–six days a week in 12-hour shifts in construction. A friend lives with them and tends to the children during the day. Her husband leaves about 9 or 10 in the morning and won't return until 11 at night.

Rosie describes her mornings:

> Oh, around 5 a.m. my daughter will get up. I'll give her a bottle, she'll lay back down for a while. 6:30 I'll get up to get ready for work. I'll get dressed, I'll bring . . . the dirty cups, the dirty bottles, whatever, on the sink, I'll get dressed, I'll change the baby . . . I'll make her a fresh bottle, I'll bring her in my friend's room. . . . I'll make my lunch . . . I'll get my stuff together. . . . Around 7:20 I'll bring my son . . . in my friend's room, I'll put him down in her [friend-babysitter] bed and he'll lay with her and I'll give him a fresh cup, whatever of juice or milk.
>
> . . . sometimes if my husband works early in the morning I'll get up and I'll make him coffee, I'll make him breakfast and I'll leave it on the bed nightstand, you know . . . a French toast, whatever I make him. I'll wake him up and leave and usually he's crabby, he doesn't want to talk to me so I leave him alone.

She is then off to serve food to others all day.

When her husband gets home from work at 11 p.m. or perhaps later, she cooks for him then also, often waking their son:

> . . . my son will be sleeping for hours but he'll smell the food and he'll eat with my husband. He's eating like midnight, which is not a good thing. Ok, I understand that. But I'm not gonna tell the kid 'no' if he wants to eat . . . I'll never deprive my kid of food. . . . It could be 3 in the morning; he's hungry, I'm gonna feed him.

For Rosie, 'depriving' means refusing not simply food when requested but the specific food items requested. Focusing particularly on her young son, she describes how he will find her eating Pringles or Oreos in another room and also will want to eat. Her daughter ate a 'whole bowl of Apple Jacks' the day before and the son had a whole box of Golden Grahams crackers. Acknowledging that it's 'not the best' for them she also adds that it's not like this 'all day long'.

When asked about 'food rules' she responded, 'There's none'. The babysitter is instructed in her philosophy:

> . . . whatever she [the friend-babysitter] eats, give it. Like, I told her 'If you're eating something, don't deprive them. If you're eating, give them whatever you're eating because they see what you're eating. . . . Let them have whatever' and she knows this. She's my friend since my first daughter has been a year old.

Downloaded from http://chd.sagepub.com at RUTGERS UNIV on August 19, 2009

Rosie's approach might be called extreme egalitarianism when it comes to food. She sees little need in enforcing a distinction between adults and children, and thus between adult and child foods, sometimes giving her 11-month-old a taste of Coca-Cola. She acknowledges the importance of healthful foods like fruits and vegetables and makes dinners she considers to be 'well balanced' with tortillas, rice and beans. She also sees no need in enforcing rules regarding how much or when her children eat: 'My kids . . . they're done, they're done . . . I'm not gonna force them . . . to finish'.

She prefers not to go grocery shopping with the children because she can't control them, often winding up with opened cookie bags in the basket, which she then has to purchase. Her objection is based on the cost of the cookies picked out, not on the fact that her son had picked them out or that they were cookies. She usually shops after work with a friend who has a car, often spending more than she intended:

> I can go there and say 'I'm only gonna buy tomatoes, green peppers, onions and some pork chops'. But $150 spending easily. So I'll look, well I need juice, I need cereal, I need oatmeal, I need eggs, I need tortillas. . . . And, of course, I'm a mother. Of course I'm going up and down the aisle . . . 'and maybe he'll eat this'. 'Oh, I want to try this'. 'Oh, I want to . . .' That's . . . I mean, my cabinet's full of crap. Crap I don't even use.

As a mother, she shops with her children's tastes, wants, desires and pleasures in mind. Having come from a 'strict background' where she ate 'only Filipino food' her whole childhood, Rosie self-consciously strives to offer her children a more open, more diverse culinary life than what she experienced.

The non-interventionist strategy taken by Rosie offers a different kind of meaning, a different kind of provisioning than the others. It is by having few boundaries around and rules regarding food that she can convey her sense of openness about their mutual relationship and about eating and meals. She exhibits a kind of faith in an inner, 'natural child' that what they want and like, and how much of it, is in a sense self-regulating and the best way to keep her children off sweets and junky snacks is not to consume these in front of them in the first place. The enemy is not the market but adult practices. Her children here are treated close to full persons, on equal footing with the adults immediately around them.

Discussion and conclusion

The four mothers portrayed here represent points along an incompletely known continuum of mothering strategies. We see the 'deception' strategy employed by Mary to get her children to eat healthy foods in contrast to Kim's explicit 'three-bite-rule'. Carole and Bob's uncompromising 'old school' approach would probably seem incomprehensible to Rosie, who favors extremely egalitarian practices and beliefs when it comes to feeding her children. Through

Downloaded from http://chd.sagepub.com at RUTGERS UNIV on August 19, 2009

these accounts, it is clear that mothers strive to provide definition, meaning and categorical distinction to their children regarding food and meals in the everyday practices of feeding them (see Barthes, 1997; Douglas, 1997). This meaningful labor necessarily takes into account both children's subjectivities and the commercial aspects of the foods and contexts involved.

The push and pull of the definition and the transgression of categories – some of which are more easily identified as 'commercial' than others – form the substance of the parent–child relationship as we have seen it played out in the realm of food. Food is a suitable form of material culture for examining children, mothers and commercial life precisely because of its ubiquity and the way it thereby brings up issues of taste, desire, choice, personhood and authority. Food situates the child as both subject and object – as a person or being with likes and dislikes, yet as a thing to be nourished. Feeding or providing food for a child addresses both want and need, fusing them together in the first instance practically and pragmatically in such a seamless way that, for some, these never become disentangled. Except in dire circumstances, a mother or parent cannot readily distinguish 'want' from 'need' and is thereby always intuiting and feeding both.

The mothers' narratives demonstrate how neither children's 'agency' nor commercial goods and their 'messages' reside unfettered in the daily life of the households profiled. A mother's labor, I would argue, unavoidably deals with the creation and co-creation of meaning – of goods generally, and of food specifically. Food is never simply food – i.e. unmarked and self-evident. Mothers and children fight about, negotiate, bargain, sneak and enjoy the various meanings of food and meals and, in so doing, enact their relationships. Foodstuffs are vehicles for the sorting and discerning of these social relationships – relationships of super- and subordination, of caring and sharing (see Kaplan, 2000).

The meanings of food arise also from the world of commerce and media. Licensed characters and branded food items figure significantly in some of the fights and dynamics in the supermarket and at the dinner table reported by these mothers. Mary was particularly keen on manipulating the commercial meanings of some food so as to cajole her children into eating 'healthy'. It is important, however, for social researchers to go beyond the lure of focusing on brand names and media characters as definitive of what is 'commercial' so as to recognize the everyday decisions regarding the material and semantic provisioning of foodstuffs in the course of ordinary consumption (Gronow and Warde, 2001).

Commercial meaning here extends beyond the acts of shopping and purchasing per se and into the ways in which mothers manage food and the constitution of meals. Integral to mother–child negotiations about good or bad, healthy or unhealthy, proper or improper foods are the ever-present commercial definitions of foodstuffs, some of which might appear relatively benign, like a particular brand of hotdog. Yet, mothers report how foods

Downloaded from http://chd.sagepub.com at RUTGERS UNIV on August 19, 2009

commercially identified *for* children are often recognized *by* children as culturally belonging to them (e.g. Lunchables, hot dogs, macaroni and cheese). The 'kids' foods' often conflict with maternal notions of healthy eating and of appropriateness for a 'meal'. The culture of consumption of course does not stop at the threshold of the home – and 'the home' is not necessarily antithetical to this culture – but continues to provide fodder for the meaning-making and relationship-constructing practices therein.

Hence, even seemingly 'non-commercial' things like 'vegetables' or 'lunchmeat', in the generic (i.e. not branded), acquire their symbolism and are fought over precisely because they are *not* Easy Mac or Lunchables brands, and are seen as 'adult' food to the children. Mothers and children forge the meanings of food and meals here in a system of contrasts (Barthes, 1997; Douglas, 1997). Mary's children didn't want 'their' hamburgers, only McDonald's. Commerce in this way provides not only direct and explicit meaning and definition to foods, but also forms the context wherein meanings and definitions become activated. DeVault's insight about the ubiquity of provisioning practices should neither be lost in the sea of brands and commercial images nor be ignored and thought inconsequential because of their everydayness.

The narratives offered by these four mothers may, as circumscribed as they are, nevertheless offer insights about key aspects regarding the everyday – indeed every-hour – lives of mothers. In looking at these self-descriptions and self-understandings, it makes sense to approach commerce, mothering, caring, sentiment and children as ingredients that blend together in various quantities, qualities, priorities and intensities. Not all caring has a commercial component but neither is it severely segregated from things – goods, images, meanings – made available through market means. When seeking to grasp these complex interrelations, I hope this article makes clear, one must work from the social nexus – comprised of acting and interacting parents and children – where social meaning is made, remade and put into practice.

Notes

This research was made possible by a grant from the University of Illinois Research Board (2005–6) and by in-residence support from the ESRC Cultures of Consumption Programme, Birkbeck College, University of London in spring 2007. I thank the anonymous reviewers for helpful comments on an earlier draft.

This paper was accepted for publication before the author was invited to be co-editor of *Childhood* (The Editors).

1. For instance, she mentions how advertisements have touted time-saving devices for women (DeVault, 1991: 36) but does not elaborate except to imply that they function as propaganda. In only one instance could I find an interviewee making reference to popular media. One woman remarked that *The Waltons* television show (of the 1970s) was an ideal image of a 'good household' that she did not achieve (DeVault, 1991: 49, 91).

Downloaded from http://chd.sagepub.com at RUTGERS UNIV on August 19, 2009

2. In Warde and Martens' (2000) study of eating out, the relationship between the market and various modes of provision are a bit more complex than either Warde's (1992) or DeVault's (1991) discussions, despite their lack of attention paid to children.

References

Alams, R. (2006) 'Domestic Dinner: Representations and Practices of a Proper Meal among Young Suburban Mothers', *Journal of Consumer Culture* 6(2): 203–28.

Barthes, R. (1997) 'Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption', in Carole Counihan and Penny van Esterik (eds) *Food and Culture: A Reader*, pp. 20–7. New York: Routledge. (Orig. pub. 1961.)

Bourdieu, P. (1993) *The Field of Cultural Production*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Clarke, A.J. (2004) 'Maternity and Materiality: Becoming a Mother in Consumer Culture', in J.S. Taylor, L.L. Layne and D.F. Wozniak (eds) *Consuming Motherhood*, pp. 55–71. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Coffey, T.J., D. Siegel and G. Livingston (2006) *Marketing to the New Super Consumer: Mom and Kid*. Ithaca, NY: Paramount Market Publishers.

Cook, D.T. (1995) 'The Mother as Consumer', *Sociological Quarterly* 36(3): 505–22.

DeVault, M. (1991) *Feeding the Family.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Dorow, S. (2002) 'China R Us? Care, Consumption and Transnationally Adopted Children', in D.T. Cook (ed.) *Symbolic Childhood*, pp. 149–68. New York: Peter Lang.

Douglas, M. (1997) 'Deciphering a Meal', in C. Counihan and P. van Esterik (eds) *Food and Culture: A Reader*, pp. 36–54. New York: Routledge. (Orig. pub. 1975.)

Durkheim, E. (1915) *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life.* New York: Free Press.

Gronow, J. and A. Warde (eds) (2001) *Ordinary Consumption*. London: Routledge.

Hochschild, A. (2003) 'The Commodity Frontier', *The Commercialization of Intimate Life*, pp. 30–44. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Hochschild, A. (2005) ' "Rent a Mom" and Other Services: Markets, Meanings and Emotions', *International Journal of Work Organization and Emotion* 1(1): 74–86.

James, A. (1979) 'Confections, Concoctions and Conceptions', *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford* X(2): 83–95.

Kaplan, E.B. (2000) 'Using Food as a Metaphor for Care: Middle School Kids Talk about Family, School and Class Relationships', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 29(4): 474–509.

McCracken, G. (1988) *The Long Interview*. London: Sage.

Miller, D. (1998) *A Theory of Shopping*. London: Polity Press.

Murphy, E. (2007) 'Images of Childhood in Mothers' Accounts of Contemporary Childrearing', *Childhood* 14(2): 105–27.

Neysmith, S. and M. Reitsma-Street (2005) '"Provisioning": Conceptualizing the Work of Women for 21st Century Social Policy', *Women's Studies International Forum* 28: 38–91.

Phillips, J. (2008) '"Attention, Shoppers – Family Being Constructed on Aisle Six!": Grocery Shopping and the Accomplishment of Family', in D.T. Cook (ed.) *Lived Experiences of Public Consumption*, pp. 92–110. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Power, M. (2004) 'Social Provisioning as a Starting Point for Feminist Economics', *Feminist Economics* 10(3): 3–19.

Rubin, H. and I.S. Rubin (2005) *Qualitative Interviewing*. London: Sage.

Seiter, E. (1993) *Sold Separately: Parents and Children in Consumer Culture*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Downloaded from http://chd.sagepub.com at RUTGERS UNIV on August 19, 2009

Southerton, D. (2006) ‘Provisioning’, in G. Ritzer (ed.) *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, pp. 748–50. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Warde, A. (1992) ‘Notes on the Relationship between Production and Consumption’, in R. Burrows and C. Marsh (eds) *Consumption and Class: Divisions and Change*, pp. 15–31. London: Macmillan.

Warde, A. (1997) *Consumption, Food and Taste*. London: Sage.

Warde, A. and L. Martens (2000) *Eating Out*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Zelizer, V. (1985) *Pricing the Priceless Child*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Zelizer, V. (2002) ‘Kids and Commerce’, *Childhood* 9(4): 375–96.

Zelizer, V. (2005) *The Purchase of Intimacy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Downloaded from http://chd.sagepub.com at RUTGERS UNIV on August 19, 2009