

**“What’s *wrong* with them...?”**  
**thoughts on changing behaviour in**  
**a healthier direction**

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**“What’s *wrong* with them...?”**

# thoughts on changing behaviour in a healthier direction the case of food

- 1) background – and barriers
- 2) public understandings of nutrition – contrast with professional
- 3) no obvious barriers

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# Familiar background to that question

Despite very great efforts, too many people eat an ill-advised diet – too much sugar and salt, not nearly enough fruit and vegetables – take far too little exercise, drink more alcohol than is good for them...

... prompts (at least) three questions

# Familiar background to that question

“what is *wrong* with them?”

“what is *wrong* with us – our efforts, advice, public education and so on?”

“what are the *barriers* (and enablers) to healthy living?”

# barriers... the case of food

poverty (health/food inequalities)

information

education levels

‘food deserts’

print size on labels

etc



prompts further questions...

barriers...

are not barriers (enablers) already known?

so is not the task to demolish them?

but – is ‘barrier’ a useful metaphor?

# barriers...

poverty (health/food inequalities) – high,  
tough

information – lower, tough

education levels – high/lower? tough

‘food deserts’ – lower, less tough

print size on labels – lower less tough

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the case of information lower, tough:  
a barrier?

public understandings of nutrition

difference between lay and  
professional nutritional concepts

# lay nutritional concepts

‘good food’ is:

‘cooked’, hot, having a variety of foods, ‘fresh’  
(as distinct from frozen) food,  
sufficient/substantial meals, not poor quality

N=38 most of whom equated good food and  
fresh food

Pill (1983) urban British working class

# lay nutritional concepts

‘balance’ represented a central point in conceptions of healthfulness

in terms of variety of foods; freshness: raw or cooked: quality of ingredients

those growing own veg was especially healthy  
‘free from preservatives and chemicals’ (Lupton 2000 rural Australia)

healthfulness underpinning vegetarianism,  
organic natural

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choice/ decision making about eating

Backett's study of people who did not  
always eat healthily

## the sample

very well informed, well educated, well-off, home-owners

28 middle-class couples with children  
(aged 3-10)

small sample allows in-depth interviews –  
three rounds of interviewing over 18  
months, joint/separate & (52/56) children

## findings included

concern for good health was merely **one** among many competing sets of priorities of their daily lives

## findings included

balancing priorities was

- (i) closely tied to general **views about their way of life** i.e. what is thought of as being normal, what is an appropriate way of leading life, day to day

## findings included

balancing priorities was

(ii) closely tied to the nature and obligations of **social relationships** – e.g. ‘give and take’ between couples, parents’ obligations to do the best for their children in all things

views about their way of life

“Quite often I will not follow what I’ve been talking about. This is where I say we’re not extreme in our eating habits” (man)

## views about their way of life

“I know a lot of people who are physically very healthy but I would not swap places with them, em, because I don’t think they’ve got the rest of their lives sorted out... They’re sort of manic about physical fitness and diet and things”  
(woman)

## views about their way of life

nothing in excess **and** occasional excesses, treats,  
are good for you

“I think it’s a mixture of both... I think our life could be healthier, but I don’t think we’re totally unhealthy... We’re sort of... in the middle... most of our friends tend to be about the same” (woman)

## social relationships

“I sometimes find I’m making maybe two different kinds of meals like, well especially with me at the moment being on a diet I’m not eating as much what the children are eating. I tend to buy convenience food for myself... out of M&S, it tells you the calories...

(cont.)

## social relationships

“...yesterday I had a pre-packed meal from M&S and I bought fish for Jonathan (son) because you can't keep eating fish fingers, and then Carol (daughter) doesn't like fish, so the three of us had different meals. Jack (husband) doesn't have a meal because he was training.”

## the study

Backett, Kathryn (1992) 'Taboos and excesses: lay health moralities in middle class families' *Sociology of Health & Illness* 14(2) 255-74

Backett, K.C. (1990) 'Studying Health in Families' in Cunningham-Burley, S and McKeganey N.P (eds) *Readings in Medical Sociology* London: Tavistock

## the study

- (a) an *old* study (data '87-'89)
- (b) *basic* science *but highly relevant* – focus on social relationships & general understandings about sensible way of living which are all part of ordinary everyday life *which is where eating takes place*
- (c) published in a *peer reviewed, high impact* international journal (2004: ranking 8/90 [sociology] 7/26 [social sciences, biomedical] impact factor 1.325)

re-consider barriers

**but** can any barriers (enablers) be identified in Backett's study?

if not, how far does it make sense to continue to think in such blanket terms?

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# Last thoughts

Propose 'barriers' is a metaphor to be used with great caution

What people do in respect of food, exercise, smoking, etc is part and parcel of their everyday lives and part and parcel of their thinking about the best way to lead those lives, 'in the round'

**Avoid being set up to fail!**