The Real World in a Honey Bun

certain foods – particularly sugary ones – seem to touch nerves and spark debate in the contemporary United States: witness the recent legislation limiting soft drink portion sizes in New York City and the “cupcake wars” underway in schools around the country.¹ Disagreements may be particularly heated when the foods in question are marketed primarily to children or served to children in institutional contexts. Debates about school cafeteria nutrition and the increasing alarm about rates of childhood obesity exemplify how food – seemingly the most basic of a child’s needs – is in fact a charged field for both public and household scrutiny.² These public and private conversations are rife not only with talk about what the latest in nutritional science suggests is optimal for children’s short- and long-term health, but also with moral meanings.³ As the anthropologist Sidney Mintz has put it, “though it is not easy to explain or describe clearly, the intuition that one is somehow substantiated – incarnated – out of the food one ingests can be said to carry some kind of moral charge.”⁴ As such, an individual’s eating “is a basis for linking the world of things to the world of ideas through one’s acts, and thus also a basis for relating oneself to the rest of the world.”⁵ Food practices produce and position persons – not only as individual personalities with certain tastes, but as social beings, that is, in and through relationship to others. In particular, anthropologists long have been aware that feeding, eating, and food exchange are instrumental in child socialization and establish key relationships within and beyond the immediate family.⁶ Drawing from ongoing ethnographic fieldwork at a charter school in a recently gentrified (and gentrifying) area of urban Atlanta, I suggest that the concern of parents about how their children eat has to do not only or strictly with what their children ingest, but also with broader concerns about their children’s social and emotional development and nagging uncertainty about how parents and other adults may best nurture it. These preoccupations sometimes become materialized in specific foods.

One morning, I am milling and socializing with middle school parents who have gathered in the cafeteria for a monthly principal’s coffee (this one devoted to sharing information with parents about students’ year-end portfolio projects). The formal presentation having ended, I introduce myself to a mother whom I haven’t met before, explaining my interest in children’s food and in understanding parents’ concerns about it. “That’s something I worry about,” she says, “because I’m sitting here looking at that vending machine and I’m going berserk.” Her daughter “pretty much knows what’s good” and what’s not, she says, but she is concerned about the vending machine nonetheless. “I was wondering where my daughter was getting Fruit 2 Os [a fruit-flavored water drink] – now I know. They’re not so bad,” she allows, but there are other items she finds objectionable. “You’d think they’d have some healthier options.” Glancing over at the machine, I point out that they have cheese sticks. “Yeah, and some things like Chex mix aren’t so bad,” she adds, but she singles out the packaged honey buns as particularly troubling. On another occasion, a mother who is deeply concerned to promote fresh, nutritionally balanced, and less processed foods for children, inspects the vending machine. She admits she is “sort of OK with it,” noting that this machine does not stock any sodas. “But the honey buns?” Her expression shows her dismay. Later in the year, she compliments a father who has just recounted driving out of his way to find good apples and organic yogurt for classroom snacks. Self-deprecatingly, he insists that left to his own devices, he would be just as likely to bring a big box of honey buns – the honey buns apparently standing for just how poor his judgment would be without suggestions from helpful others. In the teachers’ room, I encounter a teacher who asks whose parent I am. Explaining that I am not a parent at the school but conducting research on children’s food here, she says, “Oh, that’s you. So you’re not going to get rid of the vending machine for us?” She offers that she has never liked the machine, I point out that they have cheese sticks. “Yeah, and some things like Chex mix aren’t so bad,” she allows, but there are other items she finds objectionable. “You’d think they’d have some healthier options.” Glancing over at

The honey buns garner negative attention, perhaps standing out among the chips, cheese sticks, fruit beverages, and even Lorna Doone cookies for their sheer size and sticky glazes. Popular vending machine and convenience store fare, packaged honey buns also are reported by the Tampa Bay
Times to be highly prized treats and valuable trading commodities for inmates in Florida’s state and county prisons, pointing to their established place as a sweet fix in institutional contexts where choices are generally constrained.

In the Atlanta school, parental worries are provoked not only by the honey bun itself, but by the medium of the vending machine. One mother tells me that when she first came to tour the school when her child was set to enroll, it was the first thing she noticed: “Oh no! They have a vending machine!” When I asked her to elaborate on her objection, she explained that the machine gave these middle school students opportunities to make choices that they were not equipped to make appropriately.

I just don’t think kids are able to make wise choices. If you put that kind of stuff in front of them with a healthy option, they’re gonna choose the junk. They’re just drawn to salt, they’re drawn to probably packaging, they’re drawn to the color, you know, whatever. It’s just not, it’s just setting them up for failure. There’s no, they’re not going to make wise choices most of the time.

A father who does most of the cooking for his family went further, describing vending machine foods as highly addictive due to their nutritional content as well as the way they are purchased.

I think that the vending machines should go. I think that if you put it out there, you’re basically saying that, you know, this is okay to choose . . . I mean you wouldn’t put a vending machine that had alcohol or drugs or cigarettes, right? . . . all those things, you know, honey buns, cigarettes, and beer are all . . . potentially addictive on some level . . . and some of them are more patently addictive than others, but the idea that you would have a – I just, I really don’t like the idea of having the vending machine . . . I mean if you go to school and use your allowance at the vending machine and get some donuts, it’s kind of like somebody, you know the guy going to the street corner to get a fix or a kid stealing his parent’s cigarettes . . . If I walk into my house on Sunday morning with donuts, with Krispy Kreme donuts, and say “Look, I’ve got donuts,” that’s me saying: it’s okay for you to have these. It’s an indulgence, we’re going to share it and have it as a family, we’re all going to have a little bit of fun. We’re all going to indulge ourselves and do something that gives us a little bit of glee, but when it’s all over with, we’re going to go back to the family that tries to eat properly. If I say, you know, here’s your allowance and do with it what you want and they run down to the corner store, to the vending machines, get something and eat it secretly, you know it’s like encouraging a pattern of behavior [of] self-indulgence in private.

For this parent, foods such as donuts can be enjoyed occasionally, but it is better that they be provided and framed by parents – or, he added, even included as an (infrequent) element of school-provided lunches – so that their meanings and frequency can be appropriately managed. The danger, otherwise, is that children will use vending machines in defiant, clandestine, and addictive ways.

Yet others suggest that in some situations, children need to be given the opportunity to make “bad” food choices in order to learn to make “good” choices independently. One mother who has just described to me in some detail her concern to teach her children moderation, limit their sugar intake, and prevent obesity, agrees that she would like to see the vending machine completely gone . . . it’s just that whole dynamic of introduction at school, of what we’re introducing them to – I just think the vending machine, it could be better used for
somewhere else, not here, for some adults that have a stressful job that need a soda in the middle of the day, but not here.

Yet when she assesses the fact that some parents at the school have complained about the inclusion of chocolate milk among the daily milk options provided as part of school lunch, this parent applies a different logic. For while she views chocolate milk more as a dessert than as part of a nutritious meal, she holds that it is the responsibility of parents to introduce their children to such foods at home, to make their nutritional significance clear, and to teach their children to think about “the cause and effect” of eating such foods.

I think it [chocolate milk] should be there because I think at this school and what we stand for at this school is making choices and independent learning and sitting back and letting them work through something. They need to have options to make decisions on their own and to make the right decisions, otherwise when you get out in the real world, there’s not – you know, the Mercedes dealership is not going to be closed. You can get any car you want, you understand what I’m saying? Like your concept of what you want in the world is all there available to you, you can make a decision and you know, if you make the decision [to go the Mercedes dealership] and get a car, you know it’s going to be more expensive so you need to – I just think the judgment comes into play. You know, making those options and having to make those choices.

The implication is that a child whose choices are too curtailed in early adolescence might grow into an adult who does not know how to defer gratification and to limit his own consumption in the service of his longer-term goals.

Similarly, a teacher tells me that parents at this school tend to want their kids to be able to make independent decisions about their educational choices, but they do not seem to think the same way about the vending machine. Wouldn’t you want to talk to them about making good decisions, and about your expectations, and what is done in your family? she wonders. She focuses on the ritualized and liberatory meanings of the machine, observing that when students move up from the elementary to the middle grades (where the vending machine is available), it is “the most exciting thing ever.”

Though some parents get upset about it, she acknowledges, for the children it is a “rite of passage.” In her experience, using the vending machine is significant for the children not only because of what they can buy, but because of the act of buying – they are excited about bringing their money to school and getting to use it, in the process gaining the sense that they now attend the school where the “big kids” go. The elementary school is more regimented, she explains. For example, they have to line up to go places. In the middle school, “we are training them to make good choices. But to do that, you have to give them choices,” which might include how to spend one’s recess period or whether or not to use the vending machine. She suggests that making decisions about small food purchases, even if mistakes are made (for example, a child realizes that his money is spent but the food he has purchased is not that satisfying), offers a relatively small-stakes field on which children can gain practice in exercising independent judgment.

Thus what the vending machine raises, more acutely than do standardized school lunches, is the question of to what extent children of various ages should be allowed to make their own choices about what they eat, and within what parameters. Should a good parent or administrator set a child up for “success” by providing a number of choices, all of which are deemed “wise”? Or – if vending machine purchases are treated as indexes of children’s expanding freedom and independence – is this independence only meaningful if children are allowed to “fail” by choosing items many adults wish they would pass over? In my initial research, one of the themes that has struck me most in conversations with mostly middle-class (predominantly white, but also African American) adults in urban Atlanta is that parents are often anxious to monitor what their children eat – usually with an interest in maximizing fresh produce and limiting sugar (especially high fructose corn syrup) and highly processed foods; but they are also, in many cases, concerned about the meaning of monitoring itself – that is, they are self-conscious about the possibility that they may be over-monitoring or over-regulating. One woman described how her son willingly had gone on an elimination diet to remedy symptoms that turned out to be connected to food sensitivities. He was now feeling better and gradually adding foods back into his diet. She was letting up on her monitoring and “hovering,” she said, though her tone suggested that this was not necessarily easy. To call parental supervision “hovering” is, I think, to suggest that it is excessively nervous and unrelenting, the failing of a parent who should be allowing her child more space free from supervision.

Another mother, after describing to me her efforts to limit sugar in her children’s diets and to teach them about why fast food is bad for them, explained that Friday nights are usually order-out nights for her family – wings or Chinese. They try to make fried foods a treat, she says, and not eat them much during the week, because she knows that Friday night will be more of an indulgence. Thus managing the family’s diet is less an exercise in simple restriction than one of ongoing management and modulation. “I try not to be a Nazi about it,” she says. Recently, she remembers, while her daughter independently heated up some chicken fingers and fries, she observed the process, saying to herself, OK, I’m just going to monitor this. As she recounted the episode to me, her facial expression suggested surreptitiously or casually catching a view from the side, as if to indicate that she was watching
her daughter without wanting to make a big deal of it or to be seen watching. She was reassured when she saw that her daughter had consumed only a few pieces of the fatty foods she had prepared, but the story bespoke her own ambivalence about observing and limiting her children. She worried about what they ate, but did not want to become “a Nazi about it,” nor for her children to sense the extent of her concern.

A teacher described how the wellness policy at the school stipulates that cupcakes can be brought in for birthdays, but if so, one must also provide a “healthy choice” such as a fruit. The policy is intended to allow for children whose families who do not want them to consume cupcakes at school to be able to partake in the celebration, without having to dictate that only the “healthy choices” are allowed. On her own son’s birthday, the teacher remembers, the option she provided (in addition to cupcakes) was a strawberry shortcake. “OK, it’s a little cakey, but it had strawberries, and I put a little whipped cream on it. I don’t want it to be a Nazi state because birthdays are still important,” she says.

When parents worry about becoming “Nazis” vis-à-vis their own children (or a classroom full of children), they seem to be expressing their own understanding that choice, self-determination, and perhaps pleasure are valuable in themselves, though these may be in conflict with nutritionally “healthy choices”; and that their own and other adults’ best efforts to ensure proper eating for their children could become excessive and counterproductive, insofar as the control they exert may not extend children’s abilities to make decisions about their own bodily health (or anything else). In other words, while they are concerned about what their children eat (and associate good parental guidance with “wise choices” and eating “properly”)), parents also frame overzealous monitoring and constraint as a highly undesirable exertion of control, casting their own concern in a negative light. While parents may come down on different sides of debates about school cupcakes or vending machine honey buns, these differences would seem to depend not only on divergent ideas about minimally acceptable nutrition standards, but also on their relative angles of vision on familial and institutional ecologies of decision-making, authority, and surveillance. Paugh and Izquierdo have observed that mealtime interactions between middle-class Los Angeles parents and children “point to an uneasiness with which…parents approach issues of authority and control, while also socializing child autonomy and the American value of individual choice.” Perhaps vending machine honey buns embody this same ambivalence: on one hand, they seem to stand for much of what is, to many parents in this community, wrong with industrialized American food (it is sugary, caloric, and factory-processed), such that the exercise of parental authority to keep them out of children’s diets is often seen as legitimate. On the other hand, and for the same reasons, honey buns can stand for the “real world” and the kinds of tough choices that children will be expected to make for themselves as they grow into adults.

Cindi Katz suggests that the drive for wisely perfection Betty Friedan once described in The Feminine Mystique has been replaced more recently by an absorbing concern with childhood, which is now the focal site for anxiety “about the political economic, geopolitical, and environmental future… relayed into securing children’s futures and producing perfect childhoods.” In the realm of children’s food, this anxiety is directed towards the tricky goal of creating an individual who self-governs, ideally learning to make parentally condoned choices willingly and autonomously, while missing none of the excitement and childhood fun occasions such as birthdays and moving up to the “big kids school” are hoped to bring. Recent anthropological research has pointed to how strategies such as self-help programs and psychological therapies are being used around the world to mold children into appropriate subjects of, and successful competitors in, neoliberalized economies; transactions and compromises surrounding food consumption are among the minute ways that health-concerned American parents work to ensure that their offspring will be both physiologically and psychologically fit to thrive in a market-saturated society. Some parents worry most about the sugary, processed foods their children can consume when out of their sight, but they may worry simultaneously about their children’s developing judgment and the threat that their own watchfulness will impede rather than further that development. In this context, both children’s self-elected food choices and adults’ management of these are readily pathologized. That double, contradictory threat of parental failure might be just what makes the honey buns so maddening.

NOTES


7. The content and quality of school lunches is certainly a matter of debate among parents and administrators – at this school and in school districts around the coun- try. (For a thorough consideration of the nutritional and economic aspects of school lunch provision, see Poppendieck, Free for All.) Yet the choices students at this school can make when they opt to buy a school lunch are relatively limited, as the daily hot lunch comes with a certain entrée (usually with a meat and a vegetarian option) and a few side items, and portions are set. A few days per week, students may opt for a salad bar entrée, and here there are more choices to make; still, staff monitor students’ trays in an effort to ensure that they receive items from at least three food groups, in accordance with federal guidelines. Debates about chocolate milk notwithstanding, by contrast with the vending machine students are presented with a relatively constrained set of (relatively desirable) options on the lunch line.

8. As an external reviewer for Gastronomica observes, the “Nazi” epithet has been applied to parenting approaches in other recent contexts, for example, in critiques of breastfeeding advocacy in the United States and the UK. The image of the Nazi powerfully evokes negative qualities such as harshness, precision/rigidity, and anti-democracy or anti-individualism in contemporary U.S. discourse; how it has come to be attached, in particular, to parenting perceived as overly controlling is a ques- tion deserving of further research.


