

# Sustainable Eating: transitions in food consumption

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## Behaviour Change and the Ideological Figure of the Sovereign Consumer

- ‘Behavioural change’ – rooted in the ideological figure of the ‘sovereign consumer’ who, relatively autonomously, reflects on its lifestyle, in light of available money and time, and selects goods and services to match preferences and values.
- The ‘value – action gap’ reveals several weaknesses to this dominant understanding of consumption:
  - 1) **Equates consumption with purchase** – making customer choices the focus of analysis and policy (e.g. information, incentives & penalties).
  - 2) Focus on individual choices when **choices are clearly socially patterned**
  - 3) **Choices are not independent** from each other
  - 4) Many items acquired repetitively – in ways often described as **routine and habitual** (without any concept clarity beyond observations of repetition).

## Sustainable food consumption:

- The dominant framing of the sovereign consumer has a narrowing affect:
  - Assumes the **family meal as a default** and utterly pervasive mode of meal organization.
  - Focuses primarily on **market modes of provision** – characterised by retailers, domestic kitchens, and (busy) housewives.
  - Views eating through the **lens of ‘production’** – centred on products not meals.
- The outcomes of this narrow framing are:
  - **Conflation of popular food anxieties** into a language of ‘win-win’ (healthy, sustainable, safe, authentic, fair and animal welfare friendly foods).
  - Over-reliance on **product-centric** informational campaigns
  - Lamenting of the inability of consumers to properly eat due to a **loss of culinary skill and knowledge**
  - Failure to recognize that the **self-serviced family meal is not the default model** of ways of eating.
- Food consumption is reduced to a matter of **changing attitudes** (information); **enabling or preventing** (price); and **inspiring** (education – e.g. re-skilling people to know how to cook)
- And ‘consumer behavior’ is presented as **entirely static** – changing only when something in the external environment causes an effect.

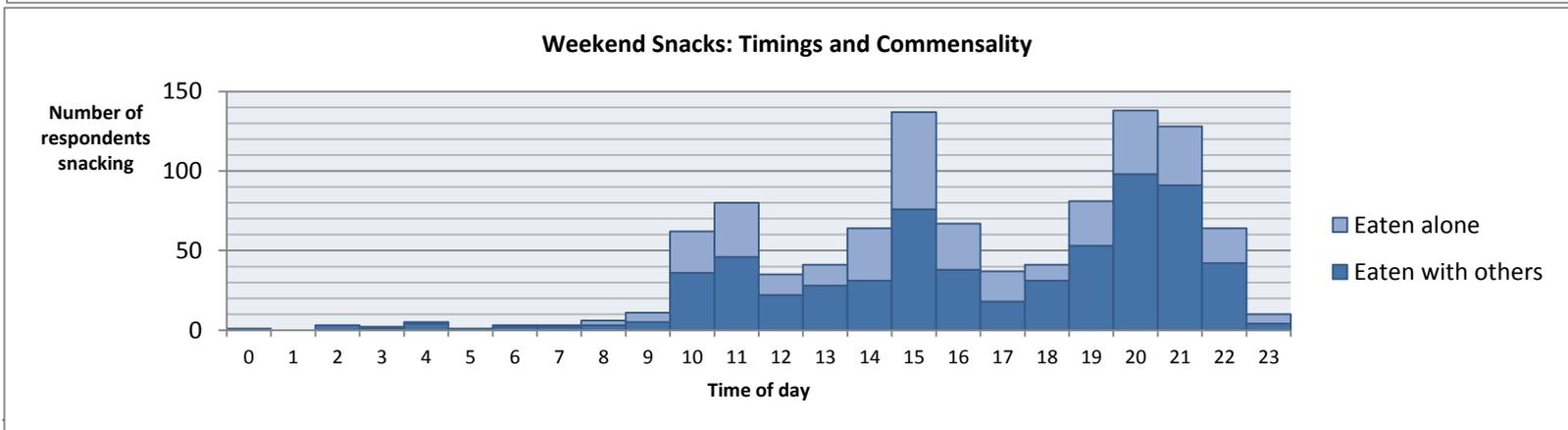
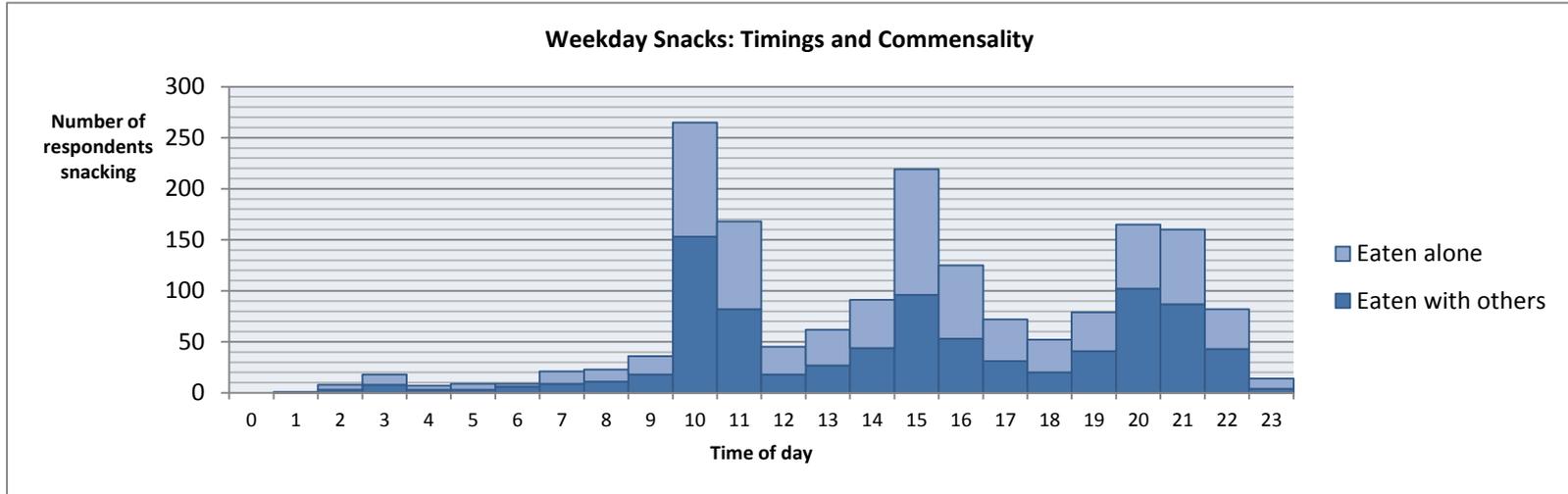
## Example 1: Changing UK meal contents

(Yates, L., Warde, A. (2015) The evolving content of meals in Great Britain. Results of a survey in 2012 in comparison with the 1950s. *Appetite*)

- Compared with a 1950s survey on the meal content of UK households, finding:
  - The main meal of the day (now the evening meal) has **not changed** as fundamentally as we might have expected – more pasta dishes and a greater diversity of meals, but fish or meat with some form of potato still dominate.
  - This is not the case for breakfast and lunch.
  - **Breakfast** – dominated by eggs and bacon in the 1950s and now almost entirely cereals and breads – and less people eat it.
  - **Lunch** – in the 1950s it was estimated that 6 out of 10 midday meals taken by working men were at home – only home-workers now eat at home. Lunchtimes consisted of stews, roasts and full meals. Today, the sandwich has come to dominate.
- Could explain through changing attitudes lighter lunchtime and breakfast meals being the success of nutritional advice.
- But a more compelling explanation would be **changes to the labour market** (more women working and shift from industrial to service occupations), with more people working further away from home and commuting.

# Example 2. Snacking

(Warde, A. & Yates, L. (F/c) 'Eating Habits and snacking: evidence from food diaries', *Sociological Review*)



# The freezer and frozen food

(Shove, E. & Southerton, D. (2000), 'Defrosting the Freezer: from novelty to convenience. A story of normalization', *Journal of Material Culture*, Vol 5, No. 3: 301-19.)

- To understand the phenomenal rise of the domestic freezer need to recognize how that **technology has become configured within a much broader system of production and consumption**, including:
  - the changing labour market;
  - the rise of supermarkets, their attendant frozen food infrastructures and subsequent decline of local stores;
  - the changing design, meanings and use of domestic kitchen;
  - emergence of related technologies and practice (like defrosting and pre-prepared meals).
- Freezers and the practices related to them have played an important role in configuring the food systems that underpin current patterns of eating.

## Concluding remarks

- What and the way we eat is a matter of the societal organization of eating habits. This means we need:
  - A **focus on practices of eating and meal occasions** above a focus on individual attitudes or products. We need to approach the problem through the lens of consumption not the logic of production.
  - To explore the **principle trajectories of eating practices** rather than default to normative assumption of the domestically catered family meal provisioned through supermarket shopping (which are components, albeit important components, of eating practices).
  - Better explanations of **what future eating practices might look like**: the kitchenless home; supermarkets as domestic service providers; the re-institutionalisation of lunchtime meals.
  - Visions of future eating practices present a **meta-narrative to open up debates** about just what sort of food culture we want, and **provides for direction in policy-making** based on the dynamics of eating practices
  - A **step change in how we frame and understand food consumption** based on the evidence, and not on the ideology of the sovereign consumer (or the choosing individual shopper).