

## Using Spoken and Written Qualitative Methods to Explore Children's and Young People's Food and Eating Practices

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### Abstract

Research examining children's and young people's food and eating practices has become more common place in recent years. Qualitative methods can be useful in such sense-making research, where an individual's narrative is likely to involve complexity, contradiction and ambiguity. Speaking and writing about food and eating can offer participants of all ages and most abilities the opportunity to delve into their own world of practice. Commonly used methods, like the individual interview and focus group, whilst suitable for studies of this kind, are not without their drawbacks. There are important ethical issues concerning children's privacy and their right not to reveal 'too much' to the researcher or their family. Innovative methods which deserve greater consideration include audio diaries, memory work/books, email interviews and interviews 'on the move'. All offer the researcher the opportunity to build rapport with and collect narratives about food and eating from children and young people.

**Keywords:** *Children; Young People; Food and Eating Practices; Spoken and Written Qualitative Methods; Narrative Inquiry*

### Introduction

**1.1** Empirically exploring everyday habits like those associated with food and eating requires the use of methods that can identify and explore the tacit, mundane behaviours associated with the acquisition, preparation, serving and eating of food. Finding out what's 'behind' what people eat often also entails exploring and listening to stories and relating this to the social context in which those stories are produced. What individuals choose to tell a researcher about what they eat and the way that they narrate their food stories can reveal much about a person's identity, life history and social and cultural background (Monrouxe 2009; Wills 2011). Involving children in research on 'everyday life' has become more common place in recent years with the emergence of the new social studies of childhood (James et al. 1998; James and James 2004) which foregrounds children's agency and, for example, their active position as members of a family. It is only possible to understand children's perspectives, identities and roles if they are involved in sharing their experiences during the research process and recent empirical work focusing on food and eating practices has taken this position as a starting point (Albon 2005; Wills et al. 2008; James et al. 2009; James et al. 2009; Wills et al. 2010; O'Connell 2012)<sup>[1]</sup>.

**1.2** This paper aims to review a selection of the empirical literature which describes or critiques some of the spoken and written methods which have been used in research on food and eating practices, with a particular emphasis on research which has explored the practices of children and young people. The paper also draws on other empirical literature which, whilst not focused on food and eating behaviours, makes an interesting methodological contribution to this debate, being centred either on exploring children's and young people's perspectives or having utilised a method which would be useful for exploring habituated practices like those associated with food and eating. Generally I refer to children as those aged up to 12 years (with younger children being aged 9 or under) and young people as being 13-19 years of age.

**1.3** This selected review of the literature relates to research which is a form of sense-making work; as such it must try to unpick and uncover the 'doings and sayings' (Halkier 2010) that are part and parcel of daily food rituals and traditions and to delve down to the social distinctions that are embedded in such practices (Wills et al. 2011). Such research must also be able to account for the performance and display that is so often associated with socially-constructed, and therefore multi-relational and multi-context, consumption practices (Halkier 2010; Housley and Smith 2010).

### Background

**2.1** Qualitative methods can be useful in sense-making research on topics like food and eating, where an individual's narrative is likely to involve complexity, contradiction and ambiguity (Brannen 2005) and where the researcher is trying to derive what social practices *mean* beyond their meaning for the individual participant. Within the qualitative toolkit, most methods make use of spoken, written or visual techniques. These are not always mutually exclusive categories and the boundaries of each can often be blurred, sometimes quite purposefully and productively. Whilst there is much to be gained from

employing visual methods, like photo or art elicitation, in a research project in which the aim is to explore tacit practices (Sweetman 2009), spoken and written methods also offer the researcher a 'way in' to participants' lives. Narrative inquiry underpins much of the research which draws on spoken and written methods though this is not always explicitly acknowledged within the literature itself. The texts produced by spoken and written methods can reveal narratives which incorporate experiences, feelings, interactions and stories about food. In this regard all stories are 'good stories' as they help draw the researcher into the context-specific world of the participant (De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2008). Speaking and, less commonly in research with children, writing about food and eating offer participants of all ages and most abilities the opportunity to delve into their own world of practice to co-produce a narrative with the researcher (De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2008).

**2.2** This paper is written with the view that it is inappropriate to assume that children or young people require 'special' or 'child friendly' methods to engage them in research (Punch 2002). This heterogeneous group has a range of needs and capacities which need to be accommodated through the methods used in a research project, as is the case for research with any human population (Harden et al. 2000). No special mention is made either of the inequity in power between the researcher and children participating in research, as such inequity is present in all social research and a participant's age is no more or less a factor in this relationship than is ethnicity or gender (Harden et al. 2000).

## **The case for using spoken or written qualitative methods**

**3.1** Research involving human participants means finding ways to allow individuals to reveal as much as they want to reveal during the research process without constraint of method. One advantage of spoken and written methods is that they give participants the opportunity to discuss food practices within the wider context of everyday life. Rather than being directed to 'only' talk or write about food and eating, researchers can draw out this information through a broader narrative inquiry approach to talk/write about, for example, 'what you did today/at the weekend'. This involves letting participants talk, or write, at length, if they wish to, even when the resulting talk/text is not directly concerned with what participants eat. Most children and young people can engage with this type of exploratory, narrative process, which can then be used to 'drill down' to more specific questions about food and eating practices as and when it is appropriate. This open-ended, biographical, approach is more likely to 'hear' children's narratives about food as they are allowed to reveal the telling of their own stories. This type of approach also means children have the opportunity to use their own words to talk about their experiences rather than interpreting what the researcher 'means' by lots of specific questions using language that does not 'make sense' to them as individuals. In short, written and spoken methods are useful for generating data and understanding which is grounded in children's and young people's own social realities (Highet, 2003). Whilst skilful elicitation of 'food stories' in the way described allows children or young people to use their own language in their own way, the researcher needs to be acknowledged in the relationship as a co-producer, as an active presence; as someone who, in helping to draw out a narrative, is also helping to shape its telling and the way the storyteller displays him or herself (Mischler 1986).

**3.2** Written and spoken methods require attention to the literacy and language capacity of participants. Written methods would usually be offered in addition to, not instead of, spoken methods and spoken methods need to be offered, wherever possible, in the first language of the participant, ideally employing a researcher who can communicate directly in that specific language or dialect, rather than using a translator or interpreter. Transcription of speech tends to add a layer of socio-linguistic interpretation to a text (e.g. whether and how to include pauses, laughter, dialect) (Keats 2009) therefore using translators adds 'something else' to a participant's narrative.

**3.3** In the remainder of this paper I consider some of the spoken and written narrative methods that have the potential for exploring children's and young people's food practices, particularly with regard to food provision and consumption in the home setting. Qualitative methods which generate spoken and written text include formal interviews (with individuals, pairs or groups), informal discussion and conversations, focus groups, journal/diary keeping, poems and prose (not discussed in this paper), memory-work and letters or emails. In considering suitable research (and methods) to review, I have paid less attention to exploring the strengths of methods adopted by researchers in the field of narrative research on food and eating practices and instead paid more attention to published work which makes interesting points about the use of spoken and written qualitative methods, regardless of the object or subject of enquiry. However, most of the literature drawn on involves children and young people and I illustrate the discussion with examples from research on food and eating practices, including illustrations from my own research in this field from the last ten years or so. In order to provide sufficient context for the examples drawn from my own research, I will now outline the research approach and recruitment strategies from these studies.

**3.4** In my doctoral research, I recruited 30 young people aged 16-24 years from a college of further education. The students who opted in to the study were asked to keep a food diary for 24 hours and to write down a memory featuring a birthday. When those selected were met face to face, I administered a food frequency questionnaire and then conducted an in-depth narrative interview (Wills 2005; Wills Unpublished).

**3.5** Subsequent to my PhD, I undertook two linked studies which aimed to explore perceptions of diet, weight and health with young teenagers and their parents or guardians. Individual interviews were conducted with, firstly 13-15 year olds and then with their nominated parent or guardian (several grandparents took part). In the first study, 36 young teenagers from lower social class families were recruited via schools and youth groups in areas of relative deprivation. In the second study, with 36 families from middle class backgrounds, participants were all recruited via schools. Two focus groups were organised during the study of middle class families, at one of the participating schools, to discuss the findings and their implications for policy. Several other papers have been published from these studies (Wills et al. 2005; Backett-Milburn et al. 2006; Wills et al. 2008; Backett-Milburn et al. 2010; Backett-Milburn et al. 2010; Wills et al. 2010; Wills et al. 2011). Pseudonyms for participants are used throughout the paper.

## **Spoken methods**

**4.1** Whilst a study's research questions should determine what methods are appropriate to use, another important consideration is the age and developmental capacity of the children or young people in the study. Young children often find an individual interview with a researcher a daunting prospect (Mauthner 1997) although if an interview is conducted after the child has had previous opportunities to meet the researcher, this fear is reduced and children are likely to talk about themselves in more detail. Younger children are not, however, likely to talk in lengthy monologue in the way that older children or young

people can and often do when interviewed, because they are not used to reflecting on their identity or food practices and are often, developmentally, unable and unwilling to do so (Harden et al. 2000). Individual interviews can, however, make children of any age feel special because they are not used to adults outside the family being interested in hearing what they have to say about their life and this can facilitate the generation of rich data.

**4.2** Parents often wish, though, to be present when a younger child is interviewed in the home setting, which then makes it harder for children to feel able to talk openly. Even when interviewing older children or teenagers, one-to-one, a parent or sibling wandering into the room where the interview is taking place can restrict what is said by participants. Mauthner reported, for example, that a 7 year old participant being interviewed in a study about poverty and welfare 'kept pressing the pause button' on the tape recorder when his father or brother came into earshot (Mauthner 1997: 18).

**4.3** The way that family eating practices are displayed during talk in an interview becomes altered when a family gatekeeper is in earshot; parents would often prefer to present a different image of their family or their life than the one put forward by children and young people (Mauthner 1997; Warin et al. 2007). The extract, below, is taken from an interview I conducted with a teenage boy, Neil, during a qualitative interview study on the familial context of food and eating practices. It neatly illustrates the length that some parents and gatekeepers will go to in disrupting a child's narrative and autonomy to reveal that narrative:

[*Annotation on transcript*: Interruption- Mum comes through and asks why Neil is laughing]

Interviewer: Just talking about school and food. We're talking about food, yeah?

Neil's mother: aha, and school. I'll just...I'll just be pottering about, in and out, sorry the door's squeaking, I'll do that now.

[*Annotation on transcript*: She then proceeds to oil the door hinge before leaving the room]

**4.4** One way to help overcome this curiosity and disruption is to interview parents, too, on a separate occasion from children and whilst maintaining confidentiality about topics discussed with each family member. This also offers the opportunity to obtain an alternative perspective about children's and young people's practices and helps to obtain a more rounded view of 'the family' (if this is of interest) than can be obtained from interviews with only one family member (Warin et al. 2007; James and Curtis 2010). In our two linked qualitative studies (Backett-Milburn et al. 2006; Wills et al. 2008; Backett-Milburn et al. 2010; Wills et al. 2010), we obtained young teenagers' (aged 13-15 years) and parents' perspectives about food, eating and health through individual interviews; following analysis, the child and parent narratives very often 'mapped' onto each other in terms of various aspects of family eating practices. Obtaining both perspectives proved a useful way for the research teams to explore the utility of Bourdieu's theories about the habitus (Bourdieu 1984) within family research on food. This would have been more difficult if we had interviewed only one generation of participants (it would have been equally interesting and revealing if the parent and child narratives had *not* neatly 'mapped' onto each other).

**4.5** Another option when using individual interviews with young participants is to conduct the interview outside, or on the move. 'Walking interviews' have been used in research with young people, particularly within geographical research, to create 'three way conversations', involving the researcher, the participant and the place (Lashua et al. 2006). This type of method has also grown out of the 'mobilities turn' within sociology which acknowledges the socio-spatial context and argues that social realities can be more usefully discussed when participants are on the move (Urry 2000; Sheller and Urry 2006). This seems particularly useful for research involving children or young people who, typically, do not have their own space at home beyond, possibly, a bedroom.

**4.6** In paired or group interviews, the involvement of more than one participant is an explicit part of the method but it has to be acknowledged that the '(semi-)public' rather than 'private' nature of the interview influences the data generated. Paired or group interviews do give children and young people the opportunity to question their parents, carers and siblings (Mauthner 1997) about why specific food practices are undertaken and for parents and other family members to themselves probe children's responses to questions from the interviewer. This dynamic aspect of paired and group interviews is one of the benefits of choosing such a method in narrative research as it helps to reveal the co-constructed nature of families and their practices (Warin et al. 2007). This is clearly illustrated in the extract below, taken from an interview I conducted with the grandparents of a teenage boy (who had already been interviewed separately) in a study exploring social class and food practices. The participants were the main food providers for their grandson, Roy.

Mrs MacLaren: We have our main meal in the evening, which is...it would be meat or some kind of fish or chicken. We don't have the chicken because...

Mr MacLaren: No, I'm not sitting eating chicken.

Mrs MacLaren: Roy likes chicken...

Mr MacLaren: And grilled steak, he loves that. I would say that's his favourite.

**4.7** Each grandparent had their own view of what their grandson liked to eat and it perhaps says something about the family dynamic that Mr MacLaren had decided to join the interview, which had been set up to just include his wife. By being flexible and allowing a second person to participate, we were able to uncover a range of views about food and eating practices but, importantly, were able to gain a more rounded picture about the family life of this young person.

**4.8** Such interviews do, however, raise issues of power and (in)equality within families. Researchers wishing to prioritise and explore the views and experiences of children must pay careful attention to and seek to address power imbalances and this is particularly the case in paired and group interview situations, when a parent or sibling can start to dominate the conversation or to try to prevent 'alternative' narratives to their own being presented to the researcher (Warin et al. 2007). Similar to feminist research, which seeks to uncover the stories of 'invisible' women (Anving and Thorsted 2000), a 'quiet' child's story is as interesting as that elicited from a more talkative child or parent and each perspective needs drawing out by the researcher (Harden et al. 2000). Indeed, all interview methods require a skilled researcher to facilitate the telling of participants' stories whilst paying careful attention to ethical issues. Dialogue will only flow if the researcher can build rapport with participants and other family members who might be

present; encourage and allow (all) children and adults to speak without interruption; and manage power and equality issues. Interview methods represent particularly intimate encounters and researchers need to consider whether they are willing to share details about their own lives or background in order to facilitate the telling of children's stories (Conolly 2008).

**4.9** It is fairly common within individual, paired or group interviews involving children and young people for researchers to rely on a toolkit of secondary methods; sentence completion exercises and vignettes are typical examples (Mauthner 1997; Jenkins et al. 2010). Harden et al (Harden et al. 2000) provide honest reflections on such techniques as a form of 'prop' for the researcher – the additional tools are not really used to enable the researcher to generate a different form of data or more depth from a narrative, they are there to help the researcher in case he/she flounders in getting children to talk and to stop children getting bored. They can also, however, help to get children or young people to say more on a topic than if they are not used which, whilst sometimes being a strength of the technique has obvious drawbacks about 'duping' participants into revealing more personal information than they would otherwise wish to do (Jenkins et al. 2010).

**4.10** Many of the issues discussed so far in this section are also salient with regard to using focus groups with children and young people. Focus groups are more likely to occur with groups of young people outside the home setting (e.g. in schools), even if the research questions relate to food at home (Warren et al. 2008; Fitzgerald et al. 2010). Researchers wishing to explore food practices need to consider whether the potential benefits of using this method outweigh the many challenges. Children are very familiar with working in groups as they are often required to do so at school and this gives researchers an opportunity to observe social interactions in situ (Halkier 2010). Familiarity with group activities means that talk often flows quite freely between children or young people, particularly when focus groups are set up with self-selected, single gender, friendship groups (Mauthner 1997). This often means that children encourage each other to respond to questions from the facilitator and from the other participants which leads to a dynamic discussion within the group (Warren et al. 2008). Överlien and colleagues found that setting up focus groups of young people who knew each other also meant that they looked out for one another in terms of not letting an individual reveal 'too much' (Överlien et al. 2005). Without careful consideration of the make-up of the group and skilled facilitation, however, this means that focus groups can generate 'well rehearsed' information rather than details of young people's private lives (Michell 1999). Indeed this means for researchers interested in narrative inquiry, the focus group is very often not the most suitable method to use. Facilitating a group where talk comes easily also has its drawbacks as it can lead some young people to raise or discuss potentially sensitive topics which could have implications not foreseen by either the researcher or the participants. For example, during a focus group I facilitated to discuss findings from a study on food and eating practices (Wills et al. 2009), the participating young teenagers raised issues about (the lack of) money available at home; parents and children going hungry; young children having to fend for themselves; and broader information about life at home, such as a parent's unemployment or a participant living with his grandparents rather than his parents. Other participants were openly shocked to discover these aspects of their peers' lives. Once revealed, information like this cannot be 'put back in the box' therefore it is essential that researchers discuss confidentiality with focus group participants prior to beginning a group session and also, if appropriate, during and again at the end of a focus group to help ensure participants know what will happen to information they revealed.

**4.11** Even so, some young people are at risk of being singled out or perceived differently by their peers as a result of participating in a focus group and considerable thought must be paid to using this method to explore food practices in depth, beyond 'fact finding' about, for example, fruit and vegetable preferences. The issue of revealing sensitive information may be less of a problem in focus groups involving very young children, who are less likely to reflect on or 'use' the information raised (Mauthner 1997). For research involving older children or teenagers, if exploring interaction with peers is an important aim (e.g. investigating food purchasing decisions during the school day), paired interviews might be a more appropriate method than focus groups. This still requires that attention be paid to the power relationships between young people and the issue of how to handle sensitive information about family life and food practices. Discussing potential pairs with someone who knows both parties (e.g. a youth worker or teacher) is often insightful and helps to minimise inequalities within chosen dyads (Hight 2003).

**4.12** Individual, paired and group interviews and focus groups tend to be fairly formal in nature and this, in itself, influences the way that participants reveal their narratives (Keats 2009). Whilst a skilled researcher can let participants talk at length and let them guide, where possible, the direction the interviews or focus groups are taking, such methods can leave participants feeling they 'ought' to take part, or that they 'owe' the researcher details about their life, having given consent to participate. Informal conversations and discussions are different to more formal spoken methods. Whilst consent is still obtained, informal conversations can happen in situ, 'on the hoof', leaving children and young people to raise or share information in front of the researcher, to remain silent, to leave the room/group or to request that other peers or adults join the conversation. This type of information gathering can be very productive as well as being a useful way to build rapport with participants to facilitate more formal methods at a later stage of a project (Hight 2003). Notes can be made by the researcher after conversations have taken place and these can inform the subsequent analysis of a body of data. During a research project exploring the food choices of young teenagers, I visited several youth groups early on in the research. This meant I got to know the young people I hoped to recruit and had many informal conversations with them about their food and eating practices, their weight and their health. This felt like an organic, natural process and it also allowed me to find out what interested young people about the research and, importantly, what put some young people off participating (e.g. being worried about inviting a researcher into a chaotic home; or worrying that parents were too busy to be interviewed themselves). It also meant I could talk to the youth workers which provided valuable information about the local, social context and particular difficulties young people experienced living in a specific neighbourhood.

**4.13** One spoken method which has received little attention within narrative research is the use of solicited audio diaries (Monrouxe 2009). This method has many of the benefits of the written techniques discussed in the next section, i.e. that data can be generated without the presence of the researcher, over a period of time, giving participants opportunity for reflection. The method allows rapport and trust to be developed between the researcher and the participant (as audio diary entries are uploaded to the researcher regularly, over a period of time) which can help to elicit more revealing narrative entries about the subject and object of enquiry as the two get to 'know' each other. Whilst this method has not, to my knowledge, been used in research with children or young people or within the field of food and eating, it is worthy of consideration, for the following reasons. Food and eating practices occur in a range of places, within the home and also outside it and the importance of space and place are more likely to be acknowledged with a method that can be used 'on the move' (Murray 2009); children and young people may lack privacy at home and using an audio diary would allow them to record their entries in a time and

place convenient to them (Thomson and Holland 2005); and, finally, thoughts, feelings and memories relating to food and eating can be fleeting and hard to 'bring to mind' (Sweetman 2009) so the solicited diary method would allow young people to document their stories at any time of the day or night from any location in which they find themselves, following any 'trigger' emotion or activity (e.g. the smell of doughnuts cooking at the seaside; walking past a sweet shop or a friend's house).

## Written methods

**5.1** Spoken methods are used more frequently than written methods in research which seeks to explore and record children's or young people's food practices or other aspects of their everyday lives. Written methods rely on children's ability and capacity to write, which excludes the very youngest children and those with the poorest literacy skills, but these methods have much to commend them and have the potential to be developed further for in-depth, narrative research on food and eating practices.

**5.2** One benefit of written methods is that they do not exclude young people or families for whom verbal communication is a problem. Ison used email, for example, to interview young people with cerebral palsy and found it appropriate for developing a continuing 'conversation' with participants (Ison 2009). Her participants found the method easy to engage with and appreciated having time to compose their email responses to questions and prompts and to expand on their stories as the study progressed. Such benefits are common within the written method toolkit. There are drawbacks, including ethical concerns about engaging children or young people in written dialogue with a 'stranger' researcher, but in reality this is no different than the ethics of parents allowing a researcher to talk to their child without an adult present and such issues should be considered and addressed prior to ethics approval being sought.

**5.3** One written method which has been under-used within the field is memory work though there are some notable exceptions which have drawn on this technique (Lupton 1994; Belasco 2008). Memory work is a method which originated with the aim of exploring "the process of the construction of the self and [for] understanding the ways in which emotions, motives, actions, choice, moral judgements, play their part in that construction" (Crawford et al 1992: 41). Memory work was first used by feminist scholars to problematise the taken-for-granted aspects of gender (Haug 1987). Using the memory work method requires participants to write about a memory, usually with a topic or 'trigger word' to prompt or guide them. As part of my doctoral research, for example, I asked young people to write about a memory of a birthday (Wills Unpublished). Whilst I did not ask participants to specifically write about 'food' in relation to their birthday (see Figure 1), most of them did so, perhaps reflecting the ubiquitous role that food plays during special occasions. It is important to carefully consider what trigger word/s will be provided for participants when using memory work, to avoid excluding individuals; hence the choice of 'birthdays' in my research since everybody has a birthday, even if they do not celebrate them.

Family life and eating habits project

YOUR NAME ..... F.....

Please tell me about your **best childhood birthday!** Tell me why it was so special? Who did you spend it with? What happened that made it so memorable? Write down everything that you can remember - I am really interested in what you've got to say.

My best childhood birthday would have to be my 7<sup>th</sup>.

I went to Ma Dondies, there most abeen about 14-15 of my friends there. I remember paying Ross the Pail and how it never landed on me. Anyway I also remember my birthday cake, it was a blue dolphin, which my Auntie made as she makes cakes of a living (wedding, birthday etc...)

it was really nice sponge ~~cake~~ with cream and strawberry in the middle.

I also got loads of presents - most of th being toy cars and action figures. -

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**Figure 1.** Example of memory work, produced by a young man called Tony (aged 16-18 years) (Wills Unpublished)

**5.4** As participants subjectively select a memory to focus on it tends to have significance for that individual, even though it may appear to be about something 'ordinary' (see Figure 2). The written memory acts as a jumping off point for the researcher and the participant to discuss the participant's life, both past and present. Whilst a group approach to analysing and interpreting written memories with participants was favoured in earlier studies (Haug 1987; Crawford et al. 1992; Lupton 1994), more recently within sociological research memory work has been used as a prompt within individual interviews (Thomson and Holland 2005) and to uncover details 'beyond the social' (Widerberg 2010). The method has also been developed in research with young people to include the use of memory books, in which participants include written memories, artefacts, photographs and drawings (Thomson and Holland 2005).

**Family life and eating habits project**

**YOUR NAME ...** .....

Please tell me about your **best childhood birthday!** Tell me why it was so special? Who did you spend it with? What happened that made it so memorable? Write down everything that you can remember - I am really interested in what you've got to say.

My 12<sup>th</sup> birthday was quite memorable for many reasons. Nothing particularly great happened but I just remember having a lot of fun with my friends. I had a small party at my house with about 8 friends over and we just eat pizza and snacks, drank fizzy drinks, listen to music and watched a lot of videos.

The reasons I remember it so well is because I don't remember laughing so much in one day ever again! In the afternoon, around 8 o'clock my family and I went out to a restaurant for a Chinese meal. I ~~thoroughly~~ totally enjoyed the meal and I also remember the surprise birthday day at the end of the meal.

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**Figure 2.** Example of memory work written by young man called Michael (aged 16-18y) (Wills Unpublished)

**5.5** Asking participants to keep a written food diary is a relatively common method within nutrition research (Stephens 2007) but it is also a suitable method to use with children and young people to uncover narratives about food and eating practices. Children aged seven to nine years, for example, eagerly engaged with the request to produce individual records involving a 24-hour recall of food/drink consumed and details about where and when food was eaten, who prepared it and where it was eaten (Mauthner 1997). In my own doctoral study, I asked young people to keep a 24-hour food diary, documenting what, where and with whom participants were with in relation to food, plus to make other notes as they wished to (Wills Unpublished). Figure 3 reveals the sort of comments that participants made, which were followed up during face to face individual interviews. Writing food diaries would work well with the production of a memory book, whereby children or young people are asked to write down their thoughts about food; collect receipts, wrappers or other artefacts; and this could be extended to include visual methods, for example to include drawings or photographs of places young people eat with their family or friends.

**5.6** Memory work, like other written techniques, often reveals aspects of an individual's biography and narrative that they may not have otherwise presented during an interview (or focus group) (Thomson and Holland 2005), as illustrated by Figure 3. This may, in part, be due to being asked to write, in private, at some time point before being interviewed face to face (or another 'follow up' method), when participants have time to reflect and expand on what they are writing over several days or weeks. This method for the telling of food stories may also work because participants' are elaborating on a memory, or topic, thereby paying less attention to the deliberate or conscious display of identity or self in front of the researcher.

**5.7** There are drawbacks to using written methods to explore narrative. Older children are perhaps more likely than younger ones to engage with a researchers' requests to be reflexive when writing about their food practices, and to write about their thoughts and feelings, and young women are perhaps more likely to favour the 'dear diary' approach than young men (Thomson and Holland 2005), though this was not the case when I conducted my doctoral research. Some participants may find it too painful or difficult to produce a written memory or simply will not engage with the writing process (though even a sentence or two can be revealing). Whilst literacy may be a barrier for some, the example in Figure 1 shows that poor spelling does not prevent young people from participating.

Family life and eating habits project: 1 Day FOOD DIARY Any questions? [wills@stir.ac.uk](mailto:wills@stir.ac.uk)

Your name: ..... Day and Date of diary: wed.....day 14/03 01

Time of day	What did you eat AND/OR drink?	Who were you with?	Where were you?	Any other comments?
6am - 8am	Nothing - I don't have time for breakfast.	—	At home.	I have to be at the station by 9.00am.
8am - 10am	Nothing	Friends from college.	In lesson at college.	—
10am - 12noon	Curly chips, Diet coke, Walnut whip and pecan Danish. Water (mayo/kerchip)	"	In college canteen.	It's cheaper to buy unhealthy foods. *
12noon - 2pm	Nothing	"	Shopping in Southend.	—
2pm - 4pm	Nothing.	"	In classes	—
4pm - 6pm	6 nuggets and a chocolate milkshake.	"	In McDonalds	Social habit.

Please turn over...

*\* everyone eating - made me feel hungry.*

*P.S I am a chocoholic on a normal day I will eat approx 4 chocolate bars. can't seem to cut down.*

Figure 3. Extract from food diary written by a young woman called Vicky (aged 19 years) (Wills Unpublished)

5.8 Issues of ownership are important and researchers need to discuss with individual participants who owns the diary or memory work/book and whether copies will be made or disseminated (Thomson and Holland 2005). It is unlikely that a diary, memory work or a memory book would be used without other methods therefore there is scope for engaging participants in a project even when they do not participate in these written exercises. However, for many, writing to a 'trigger' topic or word (rather than 'under supervision' at school, for example) frees many young people to write in detail about their lives, in their own time and their own way. A good example of the kind of data that trigger words or topics can generate is illustrated by the Mass Observation Archive ([www.massobs.org.uk](http://www.massobs.org.uk)). 'Directives' on a range of topics have been sent out to M-O 'correspondents' three or four times a year from 1937 to the present period (with some breaks in between). Correspondents are encouraged to write as much or as little as they like on directed topics, which have included 'food' (Nettleton and Uprichard 2011). This has resulted in a rich dataset and illustrates the benefit of engaging participants in narrative writing. Sadly, children's narratives have not been recorded thus far in the Archive.

**Using multiple methods**

6.1 Employing a range of qualitative methods gives the researcher a toolkit which is more likely to enable him/her to record and analyse the different facets of a child's life, across different contexts and with and without the input of adults (Chitakunye and Maclaren 2008). Employing a variety of qualitative methods is likely to deepen our understanding of a child's experience and helps us to explore and interpret their narratives about food and eating practices. For example, informal conversations between a researcher and participant, or group of participants, might influence what a child or young person reveals in a diary or poem; equally a diary entry or poem may influence what a participant subsequently wishes to focus on in an interview or focus group (Keats 2009).

6.2 It is also often beneficial to offer children or young people the opportunity to choose which method(s) they would prefer to engage with (Hight 2003); this can help to account for literacy and language issues but also helps researchers to work within a paradigm of child-centred scholarship that is conducted 'with' not 'on' children (Mayall 2010).

6.3 Employing multiple methods also means that the researcher can explore the connections and differences between the texts or data generated or displayed by individual methods. Whilst this process can be conducted by the researcher(s) alone, the opportunity to generate more depth and breadth of understanding of an individual's narrative can be enhanced when the process is undertaken with participants. This takes advantage of the co-produced nature of narrative research and allows the researcher's observations about patterns, themes and incongruities that arise from the data collected from each method to be discussed with participants before further interpretations are made and conclusions drawn. Sharing texts with participants can lead to new texts or understandings of text which have been co-constructed by the participant and researcher (Keats 2009). This often augments understanding of the complexity of everyday food practices, which, as noted earlier, are not always amenable to reflection or articulation. In my doctoral research, for example, I used three written and spoken methods to explore the family lives and food practices of young people; memory work,

descriptive food diaries and individual interviews. This meant I could analyse and reflect on the texts produced via the first two methods, before I met participants to interview them. Research with younger children might work well utilising a range of visual as well as non-visual methods.

**6.4** There is a danger, though, that instead of telling the researcher 'more' about children's lives, using multiple methods merely results in the collection of 'more data' (Darbyshire et al. 2005). "Multi-method research is not necessarily better research" (Brannen, 2005: 183). This might be particularly the case when a study is not employing an explicitly ethnographic approach, which is inherently geared towards analysing and integrating multiple perspectives of narrative, or when there are a large number of participants which would make analysing multiple data sources across a sample particularly burdensome in the time period usually available in a funded qualitative study.

## Conclusion

**7.1** In this paper I have described and critiqued some of the qualitative methods which draw on the spoken or written word and which could be employed in studies exploring children or young people's food and eating practices. As sociologists continue to be interested in the meanings associated with what are often mundane, everyday practices, it is perhaps too easy to move away from some of the more 'traditional' tools within the methods toolkit in the pursuit of 'new' ways of narrative inquiry. Commonly used methods however, like the individual interview and focus group are not without their drawbacks. Notably, there are important ethical issues concerning children's privacy and their right not to reveal 'too much' to the researcher. I have also described other spoken and written methods which deserve greater consideration when designing a study which aims to explore tacit, mundane aspects of everyday life like food and eating practices. Audio diaries, memory work/books, email interviews and interviews 'on the move' all have their merits. Whilst researchers might turn away from employing methods that require of their participant a certain level of language and literacy skill, I would encourage a closer inspection of the benefits of using spoken and written narrative methods as they are suitable for use with children and young people with a wide range of developmental capacities. Let us not be guilty of throwing out the baby with the dish water in pursuit of stories about children's lives.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The author acknowledges and is aware of the wealth of empirical evidence and concern about children's and young people's diets (as opposed to food practices) but health/diet/nutrition concerns and studies are not explicitly the focus of the current paper.

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