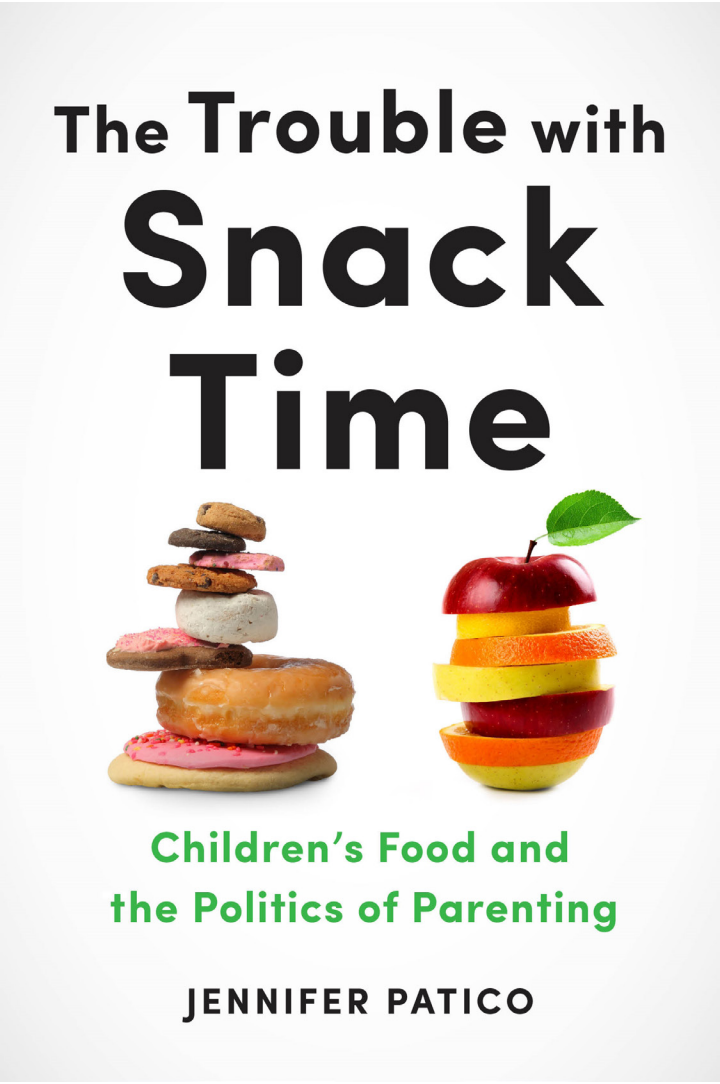

240 pages | Cloth | 978-1-4798-3533-1

Anthropology | Sociology

The Trouble with Snack Time

Children's Food and the Politics of Parenting

BY JENNIFER PATICO

Instructor's Guide

Uncovers the class and race dimensions of the "cupcake wars"

In the wake of school-lunch reform debates, heated classroom cupcake wars, and concerns over childhood obesity, the diet of American children has become a "crisis" and the cause of much anxiety among parents.

Many food-conscious parents are well educated, progressive and white, and while they may explicitly value race and class diversity, they also worry about less educated or less well-off parents offering their children food that is unhealthy. Jennifer Patico embedded herself in an urban Atlanta charter school community, spending time at school events, after-school meetings, school lunchrooms, and private homes. Drawing on interviews and ethnographic observation, she details the dilemma for parents stuck between a commitment to social inclusion and a desire for control of their children's eating. Ultimately, Patico argues that the attitudes of middle-class parents toward food reflect an underlying neoliberal capitalist ethic, in which their need to cultivate proper food consumption for their children can actually work to reinforce class privilege and exclusion.

Listening closely to adults' and children's food concerns, *The Trouble with Snack Time* explores those unintended effects and suggests how the "crisis" of children's food might be reimagined toward different ends.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

What does the feeding of children—and adults' often impassioned, worried talk about the foods children eat—say about middle-class parents' understandings of what it means to parent well, and about the kinds of individuals they feel compelled to create in their children? How are these understandings reflective of a larger political economic moment, and how do they reinforce existing forms of social inequality? This book takes up those questions through in-depth ethnographic research in "Hometown," an urban Atlanta charter school community. Embedding myself in school events, after-school meetings, school lunchrooms, and private homes, I observed how children's food was a locus for fundamental moral tensions about how to live, how to present oneself, and how to be protected from harm in a neoliberal environment. Middle-class parents took responsibility for protecting their children from an industrialized food system and for cultivating children's self-management in food and other realms; yet they did so in ways that ultimately and unintentionally tended to reinforce class privilege and the effects of social inequality. Listening closely to adults'—and children's—food concerns and contextualizing them both very locally and vis-à-vis a broader political economy, this book interrogates those unintended effects and asks how the "crisis" of children's food might be reimagined toward different ends.

This ethnography is especially applicable for anthropology, sociology, and multidisciplinary classes that thematize consumption/consumerism, neoliberalism, selfhood, childhood and parenting, class, urban life, food studies, middle classes, and ethnographic research methods and ethics. It will be accessible to most undergraduate audiences, providing a useful entrée into current debates on neoliberalism through the lens of everyday consumption in an urban context. For graduate students, the study will provide an ethnographic sandbox in which to play with concepts of class, childhood, selfhood and neoliberalism that they encounter in other, perhaps denser texts.

The Introduction presents background on the study's local context and research methods and is relevant to all readers. For those who wish to focus their students'

attention on individual chapters, Chapter 1 provides the thickest detail on local food practices, along with historical context for nutritional discourses in the United States. Chapter 2 works particularly well for discussions of selfhood and self-management in the context of neoliberalism, while Chapter 3 will fit easily in classes on childhood studies and ethnographic methods. Chapter 4 focuses on the urban politics of race, class, diversity, community and inequality and applies well to courses in urban studies and geography as well as the anthropology/sociology of race and class. Finally, the Conclusion brings the threads together to consider how we might question and reconsider the politics of children's food, parental care, and community engagement in the urban United States.

INTRODUCTION

Food, Parenting and Middle-Class Anxiety

This chapter introduces the argument of the book: that tensions in the way middle-class parents treat children's food reflect the influence of an underlying ethic that is linked with neoliberal capitalism and that shapes social inequality in the United States. Several literatures and subthemes are introduced, including the politics of parenting in the United States; middle-class aesthetics and anxieties, particularly as these relate to parenting and food; and theories of neoliberalism and its impacts on selfhood and everyday life. In addition, this chapter describes the research setting of the book: "Hometown," a K–8 charter school, and the urban, gentrifying area of Atlanta in which it is located. Finally, the chapter provides an overview of the ethnographic methods used to collect materials for this book, including reflexive discussion of the ethnographer's positioning.

Discussion Questions

1. What is intensive parenting? What is neoliberalism? How does the author suggest that these phenomena are interrelated?
2. How have scholars suggested that class inequality is reflected and reinforced through practices of child-rearing and consumption? How does the author describe the middle class that is at the center of this book? How is this similar to or different from the way you usually think about class? What does *habitus* mean?
3. What is gentrification, and how is this phenomenon relevant to the Hometown neighborhood in Atlanta?
4. What research methods were used in the study? What do you think might be some pros and cons of the methods used in this book, and of ethnographic methods in general?
5. How does the author describe her personal relationship to the subject matter of this book and the community where she conducted research? What effect do you think this has on the study and its findings? You may want to return to this question after you have read the entire book.

Supplemental Reading

Katz, Cindi. "Childhood as Spectacle: Relays of Anxiety and the Reconfiguration of the Child." *Cultural Geographies* 15, no. 1 (2008): 5-17.

Narayan, Kirin. "How Native Is a "Native" Anthropologist?" *American Anthropologist* 95, No. 3 (1993): 671-686.

CHAPTER ONE

Discerning the "Real" from the "Junk": Managing Children's Food in the Postindustrial United States

Chapter 1 draws upon ethnographic data to examine concretely the primary food concerns of parents in the Hometown community, contextualizing these against historical trends in nutritional recommendations in the United States. This chapter homes in to consider parents' experiences of what Ulrich Beck has described as "risk society," where people confront and manage the uncertainties and dangers inadvertently created through industrial production. The Hometown milieu is best described as postindustrial in that it is both of and deeply resistant to the highly commodified economy of children's food. By trusting or rejecting certain foods and brands, adults worked to understand and to address fears and challenges they experienced with and for their children.

Discussion Questions

1. What is risk society, according to Ulrich Beck? How does this concept relate to the recent history of nutritional advice in the United States?
2. What did "real" food signify to parents at Hometown?
3. What does the author mean when she says that brands like Goldfish and Annie's "occupied some borderland of convenience foods" for families at Hometown?
4. What are lovemarks? Can you think of any commodities that qualify as lovemarks in your life? What is their significance to you/your family?
5. What was the nature of Hometown parents' concerns about sugar? How did these concerns seem to be about more than nutrition, strictly speaking?

Supplemental Reading

Foster, Robert J. "The Work of the New Economy: Consumers, Brands and Value Creation." *Cultural Anthropology* 22, no. 4 (2007): 707–731.

Moffat, T. "The 'Childhood Obesity Epidemic': Health Crisis or Social Construction?" *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 24, no. 1(2010): 1-21.

CHAPTER TWO

Helicopters and Nazis: Projects of Regulation, Control, and Selfhood

Chapter 2 moves beyond nutritional discourse to consider the more social and emotional content of parents' food talk. Much of this talk was oriented toward the concern to socialize and to train but not to overly limit children, project a negative adult persona, or come across as judgmental of others' choices. The popular concept of the overprotective "helicopter parent" was an expression of these ambivalences, visible in national media and parenting blogs as well as in the ongoing commentaries of Atlanta parents; overattentiveness and food anxiety were seen as potentially negative influences on children. This chapter explores how food and feeding are wrapped up with models of personhood, that is, with conceptions of the kind of person one should be in order to be a good parent or a healthy child and socially attractive to others. In particular, it examines how power struggles around children's food reflect ideas about individuality, relationships, and the fuzzy boundaries of the self.

Discussion Questions

1. Reflect on the lunchroom stories that open this chapter. What impression does it give you of how concerns about discipline and control occupy the attention of adults at Hometown?
2. What is self-regulation? How has it been promoted in various kinds of self-help and parenting media in the US?
3. What are helicopter parents? What do you think the attitude of the author is towards so-called helicopter parenting – does she criticize it? Endorse it? Neither? What are the attitudes of Hometown parents towards "helicoptering"?
4. What are some ways that anthropologists have described concepts of selfhood in the "West" and elsewhere? How do the examples from Japan help to place US notions of individualism in perspective?
5. Ultimately, the author argues that parenting practices in Hometown reflect adults' concerns about the boundaries between selves. How so? And why does the author discuss anthropological and sociological theorizations of romantic relationships—that is, how are these useful for understanding what is happening with child-rearing and food in the United States today?

Supplemental Reading

Hoffman, Diane. “Power Struggles: The Paradoxes of Emotion and Control Among Child-Centred Mothers in Privileged America.” In *Parenting in Global Perspective: Negotiating Ideologies of Kinship, Self and Politics*, edited by C. Faircloth, D. Hoffman, and L. Layne, 299-243. London: Routledge, 2013.

Kondo, Dorinne K. *Crafting Selves: Power, Gender, and Discourses of Identity in a Japanese Workplace*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.

CHAPTER THREE

"He Doesn't Like Anything Healthy!" Constructions of Childhood

Chapter 3 listens not only to parents' discourses but also to children themselves and the ways that they engaged with adults' food meanings. Participant observation in the elementary school cafeteria yielded examples of questions children ask about food and nutrition, how they monitor one another's engagements with food, and how they perform their own healthiness or lack thereof in a collective setting. Students were quite aware of "junk" foods such as chips and candy as transgressions; by the same token, they understood these transgressions as expected and normal for children in ways they were not for adults. Likewise, adults spoke of children as naturally enjoying sugars, simple foods such as macaroni and cheese, and other less explicitly healthful foods. In this way, the qualities attributed to foods also provided means for children and adults to recognize childhood and adulthood; "healthy" food was associated with the knowledge, discernment, and self-control of maturity, while childhood was associated with pleasure and with lack of moderation. This immoderate space of childhood was under scrutiny, yet also valued and defended in ways that invite consideration of how adults ambivalently relate to "neoliberal" prescriptions for consumer self-discipline.

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think the author means when she says that "the child" is constructed through food at Hometown? How are children's food tastes typically described at Hometown? Is this similar in your own community of origin, or distinct?
2. What are some of the ethical complexities involved in conducting research with children? How did the author choose to address these?
3. How do debates about school lunch program, at Hometown and in the US more broadly, reflect adults' understandings of children as consumers? How did these concerns play out in Hometown's search for a new chef?
4. How did children at Hometown express and seek out knowledge about food and nutrition? How do their conversations about food overlap with their awareness of social issues such as race and class? Do children at Hometown seem to fit into adult and academic concepts of "the child"? How so, or not?
5. At the end of the chapter, the author asks, "what social conditions do statements about 'children' at large…tend to elide or to background?" What is her answer to this, and how do you understand it?

Supplemental Reading

Allison, Anne. “Japanese Mothers and Obentos: The Lunch-box as Ideological State Apparatus.” *Anthropological Quarterly* 64, No. 4 (1991): 195-208.

Chin, Elizabeth. *Purchasing Power: Black Kids and American Consumer Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001.

James, Allison. “Confections, Concoctions, and Conceptions.” *The Children’s Culture Reader*, edited by Henry Jenkins, 394-405. New York: NYU Press, 1998.

Ochs, Elinor, Clotilde Pontecorvo, and Alessandra Fasulo. “Socializing Taste.” *Ethnos* 61, no. 1-2 (1996): 7-46.

CHAPTER FOUR

Honoring the Cheese Puffs: Class, Community, and Engaged Parenthood

Chapter 4 considers how concerns about children's food are part and parcel of people's participation in and recognition of their urban, gentrifying community: a means of creating their urban, middle-class civic identities. As a general rule, parents held inclusivity and diversity (understood primarily but not only in terms of class and race) as explicitly valuable and beneficial to their school community. At the same time, after-school childcare programs and other school events could become cause for consternation to food-aware parents: bags of snack chips, cupcakes with bright blue frosting, or Rice Krispie treats sometimes circulated through classroom birthday parties, illicit lunchroom trades, and impromptu cooking classes. Food comparisons across families and observed differences between school and home were often fraught by concern for children's physical well-being, but these concerns and their expression were also constrained by the preference for nonjudgmental, politically circumspect, and socially aware attitudes. These sensibilities themselves index socioeconomic status and reflect class cultures, but explicit talk of status or prestige was submerged in this urban child-rearing vision, where the language of whole foods and wholesomeness coexisted carefully with that of progressivism and social inclusivity.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the significance of the title of this chapter, "honoring the cheese puffs"? Did you have any new thoughts on its significance by the time you finished the chapter?

2. What debates were underway about social diversity at Hometown at the time of the research? What kinds of social diversity were present in the school community, and how did Hometown parents seem to feel about that diversity?

3. Did parents at Hometown tend to see differences in food and eating as related directly to race? To class? How did race and class intersect—or not—in their explanations of the food differences they observed among different members of the school community?

4. What is meant by "conspicuous production," as used by the author? How does this phrase relate to Veblen's notion of "conspicuous consumption"?

5. Why does the author argue that expectations for parental "engagement" and "individualized, moralized consumer strategies for the protection of children end up reinforcing dynamics of inequality in unintended ways"?

Supplemental Reading

Bourdieu, Pierre *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 1984.

Castagna, Angelina. *Educated in Whiteness*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014.

Zimmerman, Heidi. "Caring for the Middle Class Soul: Ambivalence, Ethical Eating and the Michael Pollan Phenomenon." *Food, Culture and Society* 18, No. 1 (2015): 31-50.

CONCLUSION

Rethinking the Politics of Care and Consumption

The book's concluding chapter considers further how Hometown conceptualizations of parental care and engagement bespeak the neoliberal labor burdens middle-class parents take upon themselves as individuals, and how these practices can work at cross-purposes with their politics of inclusivity. Parents' choices, the problems they perceive, and the resources they bring to bear are embedded within larger structures of inequality that are sometimes acknowledged but appear less salient when individualized motivations are foregrounded. This reinforces a neoliberal situation in which responsibility for well-being and advancement rests on individual actors and how much they "care." Meanwhile, middle-class parents also strive not to come across as caring too much, in effect depoliticizing and obscuring their own protective labor. How else could this labor be directed, and the relationships among childhood, food, and community well-being reconceptualized? This final chapter draws comparisons between contemporary US discourses and postsocialist European perspectives to raise questions about how the burdens and challenges of children's nutrition might be differently imagined.

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think the author means when she writes that, "this middle-class emotional style acts to depoliticize and to obscure parents' protective labor as such"?
2. Why does the author compare Hometowners' views to the attitudes of postsocialist East Europeans about consumption and food safety? How do the two groups differ, and how do you think their experiences may be similar or mutually illuminating?
3. What are some of the author's questions and suggestions for shifting U.S. discourses concerning nutrition and children? Do you find any of these stimulating, helpful, and/or realistic? Do you have any alternative ideas?

Supplemental Reading

Jung, Yuson "Food Provisioning and Foodways in Postsocialist Societies: Food as Medium for Social Trust and Global Belonging." *Handbook of Food and Anthropology*, edited by Jakob Klein and James Watson, 289-307. New York: Bloomsbury, 2016.