



Changing Tastes: Meat in Our Life Histories

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RESOLVE Working Paper 05-11



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1. Introduction

A recent report conducted by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (Steinfeld et al., 2006) found that the worldwide livestock sector contributes to 18% of greenhouse gas emissions, and plays a significant part in land degradation, water depletion and biodiversity loss. Whilst this figure for greenhouse gas emissions has been disputed by some (e.g. Black, BBC News, 2010), it is clear that meat does have a significant environmental impact, when taken in conjunction with the various other indicators of environmental quality. And indeed, the food sector in the UK does contribute to a large proportion of UK greenhouse gas emissions: Druckman and Jackson (2009) found that 22% of the greenhouse gas emissions attributed to UK households in 2004 arose from food and catering, whereas space heating only accounting for 11% of emissions. In addition, Frey and Barrett (2006) found that a healthy vegetarian diet could reduce the Scottish ecological diet footprint by 40% over a healthy low-meat diet. A culmination of such findings has spurred high profile public figures such as Lord Stern (Pagnamenta, Times Online, 2009) and Sir Paul McCartney (Hickman, The Independent, 2009) to call for a switch to vegetarian or low meat diets. With the Vegetarian Society estimating that 7% of the UK population is currently vegetarian (2000), this is a big task. This paper will examine the role that meat plays in diet and lifestyle today, and how this has evolved and changed over the lifetimes of a sample of individuals in the UK. In order to carry out this examination, we will first briefly examine some of the findings of past studies investigating issues related to meat consumption and practices, as well as the novel life histories methodology we will be using to examine the subject.

1.1 Meat Consumption

In modern history, meat has played a dominant role in the diets of many living within the UK. In an examination of post-war meat consumption, Burnett (1989) looked at the change in the amount of meat consumed between 1950 and 1985. The estimates of British household consumption show that total meat consumption rose from 30.49oz per person per week to 36.77oz across this period, and based on the list of food items measured, meat appears to have accounted for around 32% of the weekly expenditure on food. This rise may be due in part to a reaction to the austerity and rationing period of post-World War II, which became unpopular by its end (Marr, 2008). But more recently, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations found that meat consumption increased from 73.5kg/person/year in 1995 to 83.9kg/person/year in 2005. This evidence suggests a current trend for increasing consumption, with meat continuing to form a large part of the diet in the UK.

But consuming meat, and indeed any type of food, is not just about statistics relating to the quantity of food consumed, about the individual, or about the act of fulfilling dietary requirements: Food is used to communicate a great deal of information about both the individual and the community. In his paper examining the psychosociology of contemporary food consumption, Barthes (1997) asks the question, "what is food?", suggesting that it is not only "...a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies", but "...a system of communication, a body of

images, a protocol of usages, situations and behaviour” (p.21). Indeed, Abrahamse, Gatersleben, and Uzzell (2009) found that attitudes towards meat are very closely tied with identity, with those who most strongly identified as being meat-eaters having the most positive attitudes towards meat-eating. Meat is also closely tied with gender. In the Food Synthesis Review (DEFRA, 2009), for example, which discusses the sustainability impacts of food consumption, they suggest that “eating less meat is antagonistic to prevailing socio-cultural constructions of masculinity” (p.10). But many studies have a tendency to focus on one aspect of meat consumption, without understanding how these factors fit together.

In our examination of meat consumption then, we need to look at the associated practices, attitudes, interpretations and meanings of food. For the benefit of the present paper, meat consumption will be defined as the ingestion of any type of meat product, including fish (excluding dairy), and food practices will be defined as how food is chosen, prepared, cooked and eaten. It is also important that the structural and social conditions which influence how food is consumed are examined. This includes, for example, the political and social climates of the time. But an examination of present day attitudes and behaviours is not sufficient: food consumption patterns and practices are created and change over time. Therefore, in order to build up a picture of meat consumption in the UK and how it forms and changes, meat consumption patterns and practices need to be examined across the lifetime, taking in to account individual, social and other extraneous factors. This allows for the creation of a much more detailed and complete picture in comparison to the picture which can be created if only current meat consumption patterns are examined. An approach which is being increasingly used within the social sciences to examine change over the lifetime is life histories.

Life histories is a qualitative interview methodology which examines memories and experiences across the lifespan to create a life story, within which we can examine various aspects of, for example, lifestyle, diet and attitudes, across the life. This has a clear benefit when it is not possible to carry out a longitudinal survey. It should, however, be noted that whilst it examines consumption over the lifetime, it is the present day construction of those consumption patterns which are presented. But examining the subjective interpretations of a person’s lifestyle and diet in this way can tell us a great deal about how they construct the role of meat within their diet and so the present study will utilise this methodology. This study will examine the role of meat consumption in the lives of a sample living in the UK, and be used to understand the origins and changes in meat consumption patterns over their life course. Since this is a fairly new approach for many in the social sciences, we would like now to discuss this approach in more detail.

1.2 The Life Histories Approach

The life histories approach is a form of oral history which has been used by historians since the 1950s and 60s to add personal narratives to the traditional historical discourse. The Oral History Society (2008) defines oral history as “the recording of

people's memories. It is the living history of everyone's unique life experiences" which "enables people who have been hidden from history to be heard". Thompson (1988) suggests that oral history can be used to study previously inaccessible aspects of the family structure such as "the roles of husband and wife, the upbringing of boys and girls... courtship, [and] sexual behaviour" (p. 29). Similarly, life histories can be utilised within the social sciences in order to understand behaviours in the individual and the social and historical influences on these, adding in-depth information about behaviour change and development which is often missing from traditional psychological approaches.

The life histories methodology is distinct from other types of oral history in that rather than focussing on a particular event or place, it involves the recording of an individual's memories and experiences from *across their lifetime*. Howarth (1998) suggests that life histories form "the backbone of oral history work" (p.v). It can be used to examine everyday practices (both past and present), attitudes and values, and memorable experiences, for example, whilst providing the context of the interviewee's life. A life history interview typically examines the interviewee's family background, experiences of childhood, school, marriage, parenthood, and retirement (for older interviewees), and present day activities, although the topics are limitless within the bounds of the interviewee's guidance. The methodology can therefore create a detailed view of the interviewee, with much of the real-life complexity which often gets left out of quantitative approaches. Armstrong (1982, in Walmsley, 1995) also suggests that by examining several different life histories, themes can be identified which make "it possible to generalise... by showing that certain biographies have, for all the idiosyncrasy, some common elements" (p.185). The ability to identify commonalities and differences between people, their practices, and their attitudes and values, makes life histories again particularly useful for the social sciences.

Life histories permit the examination of the ways in which people remember and interpret their values, practices, and preferences, and how these have developed over time and why, against the backdrop of other historical data. This then allows us to understand how people have experienced and interpreted events, experiences, and changes within their lives within the context of broader societal developments. There are many times when, as social scientists, there is a need to build a picture of the past in order to understand how we came to be. For example, when looking at sustainable consumption patterns, there is a need to understand why people consume goods in the way that they do, and how sustainable and unsustainable practices are formed. Examining attitudes using traditional psychological approaches, which are often ahistorical in their underlying assumptions, means that while it is possible to identify individual attitudes, it is not possible to understand how they came in to being, the knowledge of which could help to more carefully guide policy responses. The epistemology and methodology of the life histories approach is a technique is quite different to those within more traditional nomothetic methodologies in psychology. But rather than seeing these differences as problematic flaws (since they do not often fit with our goals of representativeness and objectivity, for example), we would argue that a idiographic methodology such as a life histories approach

captures the richness, complexity and multiple voices of the phenomenon under investigation. Methodological and paradigmatic assumptions which we believe to be particularly important within the life histories approach include:

1. **The interviewer is** not a passive listener or an impartial questioner, but is someone who is **part of the dynamic conversation** that is the interview. Alessandro Portelli (1997), for example, suggests that “people will not talk to you unless you talk to them, will not reveal themselves unless you reveal yourself”. He argues that it is important for the interviewer to offer some information about themselves, and to feel able to politely challenge what the participant says. For example, if some facts appear to contradict more established facts, then challenges can be politely made by saying “are you sure?”, “I’m not sure I agree”, or “I have heard other people tell this differently” (Portelli, 1997, p. 62).
2. The **life history interview rarely progresses in a linear way** from past to present, but often moves and jumps around according to theme under discussion. This should not be inhibited, rather allowed to progress as the participant wishes. Allowing the interviewee to tell what story they want to tell will make them feel that you are being more attentive, whereas interrupting them and/or directing the line of questioning away from their desired story may inhibit them later (Portelli, 1997). Similarly, Sypher, Hummert, and Williams (in Yow, 1997) suggest that interviewers should be “focussing the interview not on what is important to us in our lives, but what is important to our interviewees” (p.64). This means not only allowing them to follow their desired chronology, but allowing them to talk about things which may not appear to be entirely relevant at the time of the interview. If they are irrelevant, then these can simply be excluded from analysis, but if you cut the interviewee short, then you inhibit them on topics of interest to you.
3. Although the default in research is generally to automatically anonymise the participant, life historians often believe that **it is important to allow the participant to put his or her name to their story**. People often get a great deal of pleasure from telling their story, and many feel a need to pass this on to the next generation for posterity. Indeed, Thompson (1988) describes how oral history “helps the less privileged, and especially the old, towards dignity and self-confidence” (p. 31). Removing the name of the interviewee is to remove ownership from the story, as well as to remove a large part of the context of the story. That is not to say that anonymity should not be offered, but anonymity should not be the automatic assumption; rather individuality should be respected and the participant should be given the option to put their own name to their own story.
4. Life stories are very personal, and will often involve bereavement or distressing memories, (Although these are not always explicitly mentioned by the interviewer, these topics may arise naturally with the recall of other memories. It is important to respect the privacy of the interviewee, and not to push them into revealing information which they feel uncomfortable about sharing. On the other

hand, Thompson (1988) and Portelli (1997) suggest that **we must not be afraid to ask certain questions**; the interviewee will pick up on our awkwardness, and it will make them feel uneasy. Thompson (1988) writes that historians “have come for a purpose, to get information, and if ultimately ashamed of this they should not have come at all” (p.31).

5. Within an oral history interview, it is also important to **ensure that the participant is able to tell their story in their own way**, Interviewees can be empowered to take control of the interview by, for example, telling them at the start that (a) we are interested in hearing their story in order to learn from them (which should be our goal); (b) they do not have to discuss anything they do not wish, and conversely are able to discuss anything of particular interest to them; and (c) that they can terminate the interview at any point (as stated by the ethical guidelines). This is important in providing the interviewee with ownership over their interview, something which can be built upon later by providing the interviewee with a recording of the conversation.
6. **Life history does not generally aspire to be “representative”** of the population, in that it does not seek participants to represent the average (Portelli, 1997). Instead, it tries to show a range of experiences, using people who may in actuality lie at the extremes of the population (Portelli, 1997). Portelli (1997) argues that this is important because it shows what could be, suggesting that it is often the case that the imagined possibilities resonate with people more. To an oral historian then, unrepresentative samples do not pose the same problems that are perceived in quantitative psychology, but can be highly valued (although many will still endeavour to produce a representative sample).
7. Portelli (2007) writes that “**Oral sources are not objective... they are artificial, variable, and partial**” (p.38). Indeed, subjectivity arises at various different stages in the interview: in what the interviewee chooses to disclose; in the information extracted (and chosen to be extracted) by the interviewer; through selective recall by the interviewee; in the relationship between interviewee and interviewer which encourages or discourages certain disclosures; and in the way in which the oral source is interpreted. Trying to remove the subjectivity from the oral source is likely to destroy the richness of the data, since the story has been created that way for a reason, and it tells us a great deal about the interviewee’s attitudes and beliefs (as well as the co-constructed nature of the source).
8. Memory recall is variable, biased, and often distorted. Accordingly, Portelli (1997) claims that “Oral testimony... is never the same twice” (p.39), and “even the same interviewer gets different versions from the same narrator at different times” (p.39). This is analogous to the Heraclitus problem: you can never step into the same river twice. But this is something which life histories embraces, by making use of what many may see as a weakness by aiming to **understand why memory has been constructed and recalled in that particular way**.

Life histories therefore, is an exciting and rich methodology with paradigmatic assumptions which both challenge and correspond to the assumptions of other research methods within the social sciences. The present study will adopt these assumptions as far as possible in order to examine meat consumption and the associated practices over the lifespan.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

Thirteen women were interviewed for the present study. Only female participants were recruited, given the complexity of gender differences that recruiting both sexes would introduce, and the fact that English women have traditionally played a central role in the cooking of food. Given that this was an exploratory project which aimed to understand the food practices of a range of women, participants were recruited according to four main variables: 1) age; 2) income; 3) region of current residence in England; and 4) country of birth. All ate meat at the time of the study.

Participants of various ages were examined on the basis that we were interested in undertaking cross-generational comparisons. For this reason, we chose participants from three age groups: 1) 20-30 years, who had lived away from home for a period of more than 4 years (to ensure they had experienced responsibility for cooking); 2) 40-60 years, who had children over the age of 16 (to ensure their cooking choices were made for themselves rather than their children); and 3) 70+ years (above retirement age). A larger number of participants were recruited from the older age groups, given the breadth of their life experiences (see Table 1).

Those from the younger age group were recruited through voluntary groups across Surrey and by approaching this age group in a Surrey town centre. The second age group was recruited through email advertisements to organisations, both voluntary and paid, across Surrey. The older age group was recruited amongst volunteers and users of an Age Concern centre in a town in Surrey. Participants from a variety of income levels were also examined. This was achieved by selecting those from a variety of current and past professions (or the professions of their husbands) and / or based on their place of residence (rented privately / from a local authority or owned). It was thought that this would be more in keeping with the relaxed atmosphere desired of a life history interview, rather than screening based on income. For the elderly group especially, it would have been difficult to reject people on this basis having spoken to them and encouraged them to volunteer. For this reason, participants were not divided in to high and low income groups. Guildford, a town in Surrey, was selected for the recruitment of the majority of participants, given the proximity to the University of Surrey, with a group of participants selected from the Northern county of Northumberland to introduce geographic variation. These participants were matched to the older age group (age 70+). A group of migrants to the UK were also recruited given that food often becomes particularly salient and important to a person's identity when they are removed from their home (Rathzel,

2009, personal communication), enabling the interviewee to draw comparisons of their food practices across the two countries.

Table 1: The number of participants recruited by demographic variable.

Demographic Variable	Number of Participants	
Age	20-30	2
	40-60	3
	70+	4
Migrants	2	
Residents of Northumberland	2	
TOTAL	13	

Table 2 presents a summary of some key demographic information for each participant. It should be noted that whilst each of the interviews were conducted alone with the interviewee, the interview with Maggie was conducted in the presence of her husband. Whilst quotes are only taken from Maggie, there was considerable input from her husband in the interview and so his influence should be noted.

Table 2: Key demographic information for each participant

	Age	Country of Birth	County of Residence	Home Ownership Status
Margaret	75	UK	Surrey	Owner
Maggie Dawes	69	UK	Surrey	Rents from local authority
Mrs Margaret Rose Stead	70	UK	Surrey	Sheltered accommodation (local authority)
Audrey	77	UK	Surrey	Sheltered accommodation (local authority)
Jeanette	59	UK	Surrey	Owner
Barbara	59	UK	Surrey	Owner
Val Brayne	55	UK	Surrey	Owner
Sue Park	30	South Korea	Surrey	Renter
Lina	36	Colombia	Surrey	Renter
Muriel Margaret Laws	74	UK	Northumberland	Owner
Mary Herdman	75	UK	Northumberland	Owner
Charlie	27	UK	Surrey	Renter (about to be owner)
Bex	25	UK	Surrey	Living with family / partner

2.2 Design and Interview Schedule

Semi-structured life history interviews were conducted in the period between March and December, 2009. The interviews were conducted either in the homes of the interviewees or the office of the interviewer, and lasted between one and two hours each (although one participant was interviewed across two sessions). The interviewer first asked the interviewee to sign a consent form, which informed them of their rights and acquired permission for the voice recordings to be used in publications and further work. The interviewee was given the option of remaining anonymous or of being named, as well as whether they would like their voice recording to be deleted, in which case the researchers would be allowed to work solely on a transcript of their interview. The interview was conducted according to the interview schedule, which was based on a schedule developed by Thompson (2009) for the Edwardians Project. The interview schedule was not, however, a prescriptive one, but acted as more of a guide to help the interviewer focus on particular topics of interest. The interviewee played a large role in determining what topics they wanted to embellish and what structure the interview should follow.

2.3 Equipment

Interviews were recorded using an Edirol R-09 digital voice recorder and transcribed in to a Microsoft Word document by an independent transcriber not associated with the project.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 Analysis

The interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This was a process by which any data related to food was identified and coded in to corresponding categories created using the qualitative analysis tool, MAXQDA 2007. Categories were therefore created in an inductive (bottom-up) fashion, with the content dictating their location and proximity to the various other pieces of information. These categories, or themes, were then grouped in to larger themes, incorporating all mentions of food practices and the related emotions, experiences, and memories.

3.2 Themes

Many different themes were identified during the analysis, in what was a very rich data set. These themes were grouped in to the following overriding themes to describe the data: 1) the functions that meat serve; 2) the subjective interpretations of meat; 3) the origins, state, and changes in meat consumption and meat-related food practices; 4) the cultural conditions experienced by the interviewees, past and present. These will now be described in greater detail and examined using extracts from the interviews.

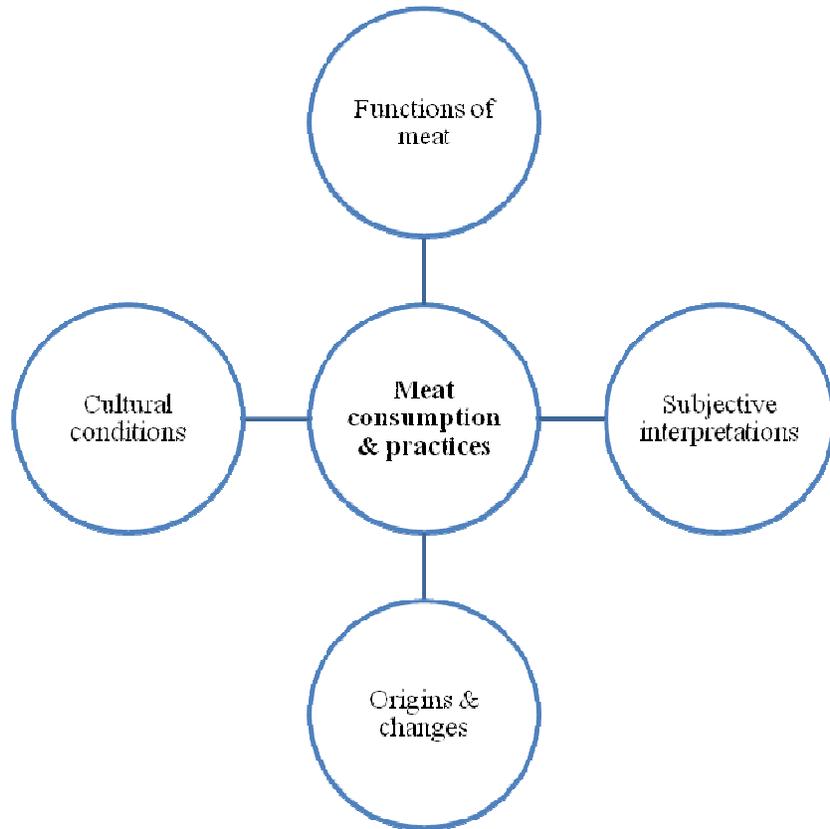


Figure 1: The four groups of themes identified through thematic analysis of the transcripts.

3.2.1 *The Functions of Meat*

Food serves many functions both for the individual and for society as a whole. For the interviewees in this study, food served as a catalyst for social relations, it served necessity and health, provided information about status, and was part of the development and display of capabilities (e.g. the ability to make delicious cakes). Each of these points will be dealt with in turn now, with a focus on the first of these points.

~~Food as a catalyst for social relations~~

One of the strongest themes which emerged during the analysis was the way in which food was used as a catalyst for social relations: it was used to celebrate and bring family together. And meat often played a central role in this function. For example, meat appears to be the central ingredient for Lina when celebrating with family: "...a little bit for anything, really: greased onions, burgers – anything. Then

food! Special food for the day. We can choose anything, really. Salad. We ... have salad and meat – any kind of meat. And something else.” For the British-born interviewees, Sunday lunches are a highly valued and much loved tradition in both past and present, and their occasion for improving social relations. Margaret said of her favourite childhood meal: “Well I suppose roast was the, was the treat for the week.” Because of the importance of the Sunday roast, this was something which really drew family and friends together, for each of the different age groups. Bex said:

“Sunday definitely all together. So I think that was pretty well one day that we’d all be together, I think. Me and my brother’d often eat together, ‘cos he’s a couple of years older than me. And I think it was important for my parents to try and get us to sit down as a family as often as they could.”

For Bex’s family, the Sunday roast was seen as an opportunity to bring together their family, at a time when the children were perhaps inclined to do things more individually. It was likely due to the strong traditional associations and position as a treat that meant the children were happy to oblige their parents in being present. The motivation for the parents may be the opportunity to see and talk to their children, but also due to the commonly held belief that it is important for the family unit to come together and socialise. The belief in the importance of this is also discussed by Barbara:

“And we would eat all together when we were all around, which tended to be Sunday lunch when we intended to be all around. But even later, as they were growing up and I’m working all day Sunday, and then Sunday lunch would tend to be sort of like five o’clock when I come home from work, sort of thing. Then we would all eat together. But as far as possible I kept up that habit, yeah. I still like sitting down to eat at the table together. I think that sort of food on-the-go is – I think you lose a lot of family contact then, instead of unwinding and talking to each other sort of times. Good idea for kids just to sit still and just sort of, you know, chat.”

For Val, whose children live away from home now, it is a chance to demonstrate her cooking skills and to be able to provide her sons with this traditional and valued meal. She says that they enjoy coming home, which is probably for them the most traditional setting for this traditional meal, but it is clearly also an important occasion for Val, since it enables her to spend time with her children and fulfil the maternal role once more:

“And I tend to do – on a Sunday still do a roast, because the boys don’t have that sort of food so much. You know, they don’t live at home – although Jonathan cooks a roast. He does most of the cooking in their house. So he’ll cook a roast, ‘cos his wife’s not – she says ‘I’m no cook!’ [*they laugh*] So he’s teaching her. And so he’ll cook a roast sometimes. But they like it when they come home and have a roast dinner!”

Christmas time also appears to be an important time for socialising, and the importance of meat as being a focal point for the Christmas meal is again clear:

“Well a treat would be having chicken or something like that you know, a big chicken and er, all the, well all the trimmings, things like um, you know, stuffing and roast potatoes and carrots and peas and things like that. Christmas pudding. Um, yes, we had good Christmasses.” [Margaret]

As with the roast dinners, Jeannette also celebrates the Christmas meal as being an occasion to gather together the family to create a large social occasion, something which she attributes to the similar traditions of her and her husband’s families:

“They always ate meals as a family, so we both came from that sort of tradition. We carried it on, and I think it’s important... So sort at a big family gathering, like at Christmas, you know, we all get together and have these big, very noisy meals with everybody, all sort of talking and laughing, whatever. Which is lovely.”

And similarly for Bex, family is the most important element of her Christmas, with the meal being the thing they come together for, rather than being the main attraction:

“...we’ve always gone round to see other family during Christmas. So we’ve actually worked out that since we’ve lived here – so that’s about, what, 22, 23 years – I’ve only had four or five Christmases here. So with that being the case, like we’ve never had our own Christmas; we’ve always gone to grandparents’ or uncle and aunt’s for Christmas and helped with their dinner... So traditionally I guess there haven’t been many traditions in that sense, apart from being at family.”

From these examples, we can see that food, and in particular meat, is a very strong catalyst for social relations amongst the interviewees. The meal often appears to be either an excuse or a lure for gathering family members together, something which the interviewees clearly value; whether for the simple pleasure of being with other family members, or for satisfying the belief that it is important to sit down together as a family unit to talk. This is a very important function for meat to serve.

~~Status~~

Food, as with other goods such as clothes, appears to have served to provide some information about the status of individuals. Maggie and her husband, for example, talked about the process of dating when they were younger, and explained that the man would often take the woman out for dinner, adding: “But if your boyfriend was rich he’d buy you a pudding as well, for the price of a Knickerbocker Glory!”. This

suggests that the type of food bought by the man would reveal information about status, both social and financial. Maggie also discussed the types of meat which were consumed by herself and those around her when she was a child, and as with the previous example, it is clear that the type of meat consumed provided others with information about their status. She demonstrates the good financial situation she enjoyed as a child by saying that she had regular access to chicken meat, something which she believed (jointly asserted by her husband) was uncommon amongst those in her community:

“But in like parties and that, chicken was just a special meal, wasn’t it. (*Ah yeah*) That was just Christmas... But there again, yes, I suppose, there again I was spoilt, because... we used to have our own chickens, you see... So chicken, we had chicken more often... No, but turkey was a luxury, wasn’t it, really. (*Mm*) I mean, most families had chicken. (*Yeah*) I mean, even though we could afford turkey, we never had it – we had chicken. But chicken was a luxury, really. I must have been a spoilt brat! [*they laugh*] ‘Cos it wasn’t a luxury to me!”

But this is a status which she is not entirely comfortable with, most likely because she believed her family had made her feel overly lucky and grateful for this luxury, and so she describes herself as spoilt. She then tries to reposition herself by explaining that although her family was in a good financial position, she was still unable to have turkey much, something which appears here to be associated with an even higher social status. Meat then, as with other food types, appears to be a good indicator of status, and a way in which to position the self and others in society.

~~*The display of capabilities*~~

The ability to cook and prepare certain foods also serves to display the various capabilities that the self and others have. Each of the interviewees, for example, recalled a memory of a particular cake they had made or the wonderful cooking of a family member with great pride. Val, for example, describes how she made 144 small cakes for her son’s wedding, a difficult task which she accomplished well:

“Made my son’s wedding cake, which was a trial! [*laughs*] ‘Cos they wanted individual chocolate cakes. You know, rather than having one big cake... It was very tricky. Because the trouble with that – fruitcakes are fine because you can make them a long time in advance, but sponges – well, they were very tricky to ice, because you had to roll out fondant icing and cut it out in a square shape and put your ribbon on top and round it, and – oh dear! – took hours and hours and hours! [*laughs*]”

Although it may initially sound like she is complaining about the task, the interviewer grasped from the tone of this passage her pride at being able to undertake it. She was keen to repeat this again when her daughter-in-law revealed she had not been able to have any cake: “So I made them a replica, sort of a bigger

one, exactly the same. I put a pink bow on it [*laughs*] for their anniversary!". The interviewees showed particular pride in being able to make traditional home-cooked food, especially puddings, cakes, and of most interest to us here, meat dishes. In the following quotation, Margaret talks about learning to cook as a child. She is very modest here and talks of cooking "simple" foods (a term discussed later), but we believe that rather than saying she made foods which were very easy to prepare, this coolness is intended to reflect the strength of her cooking abilities:

"Oh, nothing, nothing very, simple, it was usually, a main meal and a pudding, you know, some, well, of course, um, it was sort of, in those days it was meat and two veg type of thing. You know, you'd cook a, perhaps a chop, and um some potatoes and some carrots, and peas and things like that. And just have a very simple pudding."

As mentioned earlier however, the interviewees were not only keen to reflect upon their own cooking abilities, but those of their family. And indeed, Margaret says with great pride: "my son-in-law does an absolutely wonderful barbeque, so we go there when we want [*laughs*], when, when he's doing a barbeque". His capabilities as a cook are clearly demonstrated here, and it may be that his masculinity is affirmed by describing his ability to cook barbequed meat, a subject which will be discussed in more detail later.

~~Necessity and Health~~

Meat was also described by some as playing an important role in maintaining health, and something which is an essential part of the diet. Sue Park, for example, describes the food she took to school as a child:

"Soup, rice. And some vegetables. And sometimes my mum make like a hamburger steak. So. And sometimes sushi. Like my mum always try to make a balance between protein and vitamin! [*laughs*] So she already think about this! So for protein my mum give fish or... One day fish, one day hamburger steak, one day sushi."

Sue Park clearly believes in the importance of consuming some meat as part of a healthy daily diet. But in the same interview, she also discusses the dangers to health of eating too much meat, and discusses the merits of the traditional diet which was low in meat content:

"Older days, it's the very traditional way. So everybody thought we should follow that way. Because for a long time we live like this, cook like this, eat like this. So when we eat too much oil, like deep-frying, we feel very sick. Deep-frying. And of course more and more our eating habit changes in old days. Just a very few time meat. Eat no meat. But nowadays some people just only eat the meat. So we believe that kind of habit causes the heart disease. And so the government recommend the older way!"

Health, at least for Sue Park, seems to be an important issue, and something which is clearly linked to the dual qualities of meat, which can be both a good source of protein and a source of high fat and cholesterol. Meat appears to serve several functions therefore: it is perceived as a catalyst for social relations, as a way to indicate status, as a display of capabilities and serving as an important factor in promoting or reducing health.

3.2.2 Subjective Interpretations

Meat is also subjectively interpreted in different lights. For the present interviewees, meat was interpreted as something traditional, as something which differed across the generations, and as something which could either be ethical or unethical:

~~Generational differences and simple versus sophisticated foods~~

Several of the interviewees said that they believed there to be marked differences in the consumption patterns and practices between the older and younger generations. The older interviewees (aged 40+) in particular often talked about the traditional diets of their parents and their own childhood as very simple, with frequent reference to the 'meat and two veg' diet discussed earlier. In contrast, their present day diets, which in several cases were lower in meat consumption compared to the past (also discussed earlier), were construed as more sophisticated and modern. For many of the interviewees then, there seemed to be a dichotomy between "simple" (traditional) and "sophisticated" (modern) foods (terms used by Margaret). Take for example Margaret's description of foods that were used for celebration when she was a child:

"...people didn't have, well you didn't have the sophisticated food that you've got now. You know, this is, it's, it was all very basic stuff, but all very good, I mean all, they wouldn't buy, go to the shop and buy cakes, the mums would make cakes. They were all shapes and sizes but they were pretty edible [laughs]."

One of the key sources of the differences between traditional and modern diets, according to the interviewees, was the increasing variety and availability of certain food stuffs, which they believed changed significantly with the introduction of supermarkets and delicatessens. For example, when asked whether rice was easily available during her childhood, Margaret responded: "Yes, but not in the varieties you've got now. I mean it was, I don't think we ever thought about having... Indian rice... all you could get would be, um, the different, you know, pudding rice". This suggests then that the choice of food was limited by the availability of ingredients. Interestingly, Barbara talks in some detail about how the types of food available when she was a teenager, which she describes as initially "plain", changed with the introduction of a more "exotic" delicatessen:

"In the early Sixties a grocer moved to the village who was married to an Argentinean lady. And because of his interest in various exotic sort of foods, he

opened what was strictly speaking a grocers... whereas the grocers previously had just been your ordinary in that days, you know, steak-and-kidney meat pies, lots of vegetables, potatoes. So real post-War plain food cooking. Rice pudding. Jam sponge, treacle sponge custard – you know, very English traditional cooking. Mr Batty introduced the delicatessen, and suddenly everybody had access to things like salami and cheeses that they hadn't heard of before, and something called okra, which is a very weird slimy green vegetable which used to come in a huge jar, I can remember that. But when I worked there in my Saturday job, I used to quite enjoy because your coffee or lunch break, you used to be able to have a crusty roll... and something off the deli counter. So I got to experience all these other different meats... And he used to source sort of unusual vegetables and meats and things for people, 'cos he just had access to different things that we sort of hadn't experienced before."

There are several issues raised in this quote. Firstly, the dichotomy between simple and traditional foods and more exotic, modern foods is very clear. Secondly, the introduction of this new selection of foods is something which was celebrated and very memorable for Barbara. She portrays a real excitement and a desire to try new foods, not just for herself, but for her community. She also seems to celebrate the move from the simple food of post-war austerity Britain to more varied food stuffs, with particular reference to the diversity of meats on offer, contrasting it to the traditional steak and kidney pies which dominated at the time. This excitement at moving away from the plain foods of the ration era is something, which if Marr (2008) is to be believed about the discontent at rationing, will have captured and motivated many others around the country. We can also speculate that the introduction of new types of food made possible this transition away from the meat and two veg meal, and that the greater diversity in vegetables available may have allowed for the development and acceptance of less heavily meat-based meals.

But the change from simple to sophisticated foods was often seen in a conflicting light, being discussed both as a positive change towards greater variety and as a negative factor which caused a move away from the highly regarded diets of the past. Some therefore seemed to both condemn and celebrate modern diets. For example, when talking about how she would celebrate her birthday as a child, Margaret is scathing of the more modern birthday party:

"I don't know how parents cope these days, when I see what it costs my Grand, my Daughter to, you know, to, to, give a party for her children and I think to myself, you know, well my mother would be horrified. You had a very simple party, you'd have birthday cake that somebody had made, you'd have er, little fairy cakes, you'd have um, er, ice cream or jelly, and bloumonge and things like that."

Here, simple foods are highly valued, and the complexity of modern day party foods is seen as a negative thing. But this argument also highlights the importance in

distinguishing fact from perception: the traditional foods may be seen as simple by Margaret, but in actual fact it may well be the case that they took a larger amount of time and skill to prepare than the foods her daughter prepared / bought. Simple foods in this context then may be less of a reflection of time and skill involved, but more about whether they were home-made and conformed to tradition, or the cost and number / type of ingredients involved.

Returning to the idea of coexisting celebration and condemnation of modern diets, when asked how her cooking and attitudes to food had changed across her life, Margaret responds:

“Attitude hasn't changed but what you cook has changed. I mean there's much more, variety now... the food you can get and the food you can cook, is much more sophisticated. You know, things like curry, you know I never made curry when the children were young. When they got older yes obviously. Um, different things that er, you can, different foods that you can get now are obviously going to influence what you cook.”

Margaret also said at various points how she enjoyed taking her children out to Italian and Chinese restaurants. So rather than totally condemning modern food, she does seem to appreciate and perhaps celebrate the greater variety of foods available, which seem to serve her well at various times. But there is still an air of nervousness towards sophisticated modern foods, and it may be that she is still influenced by the attitudes of her parents, who were distinctly wary of non-traditional foods. This concept of traditional food is likely then to be closely aligned with early experiences, social norms, and identity.

So far we have discussed generational differences as perceived by the interviewees, who are drawing on their own experiences and comparing the generations of their own family. We, however, have the benefit of being able to view and compare the life histories of several present day inter-familial generations, and can compare the past and present (reported) diets of the interviewees. Surprisingly, there were many more similarities between the various generations of women we interviewed than could have been predicted. Indeed, there appears to be a great deal of convergence between the interviewees. The similarities between the women aged 40-60 years and 70+ years were perhaps expected, and these generations have been discussed often interchangeably so far, but the commonalities between the youngest group and these older groups are surprising. One of the most striking commonalities is the way in which the type of diet and amount of meat consumed has changed across the life. It was not only the older interviewees who reported having a dominant meat and two veg diet in childhood and adolescence, transitioning to a diet more influenced by an increasing variety of food stuffs and more foreign meals, but this appeared to be the case for the younger age group too. The way Charlie describes her childhood diet, for example, is very similar to the older interviewees: a diet based around meat and two veg, using a lot of fresh vegetables, and little convenience food. And similarly, she appears to disapprove of convenience meals and celebrate the simple, home-cooked meal:

“[We had] a home-cooked dinner every day... dinner would always be at six, and it would be like everybody’d sit at the dinner table and get a home-cooked dinner. It was never like fast food or like microwaved; it was always like cooked fresh. I think probably the only time we’d have takeaways would be like for somebody’s birthday or like a treat. It wasn’t like the normal... [Interviewer asks: *And did you eat a lot of meat and that?*]... Yeah. Yeah, I think there was generally like meat and two veg kind of dinner – with more potatoes and carrots! *[they laugh]*”

As with the other interviewees, Charlie’s diet has changed since childhood, influenced by her experiences of living away from home, financial constraints (discussed later), and the food preferences of her boyfriend. She also describes the influence of new types of vegetables and foreign foods in her cooking, similarly described by Barbara earlier. This has changed the way she eats and cooks, and we can surmise that, as discussed earlier with the other interviewees, whilst meat was an integral part of her childhood diet, it is less integral in the types of food she consumes today. But she maintains that there are commonalities with her childhood experiences of cooking and with the essential beliefs which accompany those, with an emphasis on fresh, home-cooked (associated with pride and a show of cooking capabilities) meals:

“...I definitely think that probably my food resembles more from when I was having like food cooked for me at home. But I think it’s got kind of... With like my mum’s cooking, it was very kind of like old-fashioned and traditional, and it wouldn’t really be like – you’d never have like risottos or... Like the only rice dish you’d really have would be like sweet and sour sauce and rice. So I think it’s more kind of like moved on and maybe a bit more interesting and different now and using like different ingredients. Like courgettes and aubergines and peppers were really things that my mum never cooked with. It was more your kind of standard vegetables. So I think it’s changed in that way. And, yeah, it’s probably a bit more interesting and different kind of meals than I had when I was younger, but it’s kind of based around the whole freshness, I think, that I had when I was younger.”

Also of interest in this quote, is the way in which Charlie tries to reconcile the simple, traditional diet with the more varied, modern diet. Whilst the two were often more conflicting in the previous examples, or there was a tendency to prefer one type of diet, Charlie appears to quite successfully merge the two identities, celebrating both the traditional diet with fresh, home-cooked food, and the newer, modern styles and ingredients. Jeannette’s interview chimes very closely with this quotation, and similarly she seems to have changed the way she cooks over her life, managing to tie in the traditional diet of her childhood with more experimental foods:

“I probably started off doing similar foods... [But] Styles in cooking have changed over the years, and I suppose I’ve just kept up with the different trends

or styles or whatever you'd like to call it, in cooking. So I still do cook casseroles and I still do roast dinners – I mean, every Sunday we have a roast dinner, or most Sundays we have a roast dinner. And I will do some more traditional things. At least, I might sometimes during the week we might have chops and potatoes and two veg, which I suppose is the sort of thing that my parents grew up on and would give to me, what we used to have when I was a child. But I don't – I used to do meatloaf a lot, but I don't do that any more – it's somehow gone out of fashion. And I didn't used to cook with chilis, but that's become fashionable. And so now I do that. I'm interested in it. I like cooking, and I like cookery books... I quite like buying cookery magazines and things, flicking through them and 'Oh, that sounds nice. I'll try that.' I like trying new things".

As mentioned earlier, this transition away from the meat and two veg is appears to be associated with an increase in the number of meat-free or low-meat meals. Charlie then, as with many of the older interviewees, has also transitioned to a lower meat diet:

"Oh, I eat a lot less meat now, 'cos it is more just kind of like – it's a treat dinner rather than kind of expected from the meal, I guess. But we do use alternative kind of like – if we were like sometimes making a chilli or something, we'd use the Quorn mince. So we're kind of replacing it with different alternatives.

For Charlie then, as with the other interviewees, meat plays less of a central role in her diet today. It appears that eating less meat is also more socially acceptable for her than when she was younger, with a reduction in her consumption (to "...two or three times a week") and her finding new ways to replace it with alternatives. There do therefore appear to be similar present day attitudes and social norms towards meat consumption across the generations. Whilst there are perceived generational differences then, real or not, the generations of women we have compared seem to share more similarities than might be initially imagined.

~~Ethical meat~~

An issue which was raised by the two younger interviewees is the importance of consuming meat which has been ethically and responsibly sourced. Indeed, not only was ethically sourced meat the preferred option for the two women, but it guided many of their decisions when buying meat. Interestingly, this was not mentioned explicitly by the other age groups (it was not a subject which was brought up by the interviewer), which is perhaps a reflection of the different social norms facing young people. For Bex, it is important that she can identify the source of her meat, and that it is British and local, of a good quality, organic, free-range, and does not negatively impact upon the environment:

“Yeah, I think I’m definitely more keen to ensure that, whatever meat I’m buying, that it comes from British if possible, and I guess like organic if possible as well, even though it kind of makes it more expensive. So I think I prefer to eat less meat but better quality. And like pasture-grazed cows.”

Similarly to Bex, Charlie says that she has reduced her meat consumption recently and selects meat which is local, organic, and free-range:

“We probably have meat maybe two or three times a week. We don’t have meat with every meal, generally because we would source that from like a farmer’s market or from the butchers, like free-range organic meat now. So it’s not so easy to like just nip into the supermarket and have meat for every dinner. And I guess because it costs more ‘cos of where we buy it from, it’s more of a treat when we have meat.”

For both interviewees, this is information which they have volunteered, and so ethically sourced meat is likely to be important to them. Bex puts her desire to buy ethical meat down to the nature of her job at an environmental charity, saying: “I’m just more aware of it ‘cos I’ve had to research it for work. I’m actually doing briefings for ... climate change champions and telling them about the meat and dairy issues”. Her main motivation then appears to be the preservation of the environment, and it is something which is clearly also important to her identity as someone who works and campaigns for environmental issues. For Charlie, whilst she does express concerns about the environmental impact, she appears to have less knowledge of this subject, and so it is more about animal welfare. It is also closely linked with the beliefs of her boyfriend, suggesting the influence of social norms:

“I think it’s a lot to do with when I met Barry he was vegetarian. But it wasn’t so much that he was against eating meat; it was more that he was against how animals were treated who were reared to be for meat, and the lifestyle that they had. So it basically rubbed off on me... and just having more knowledge around how animals are kind of treated... the lifestyle that they have and how they’re treated, and what they’re fed and the environment”

They both also describe going to great lengths to select their meat, something which is probably quite an inconvenience to them in many ways. But Charlie does not seem to resent this, even though she admits its limitations:

“We don’t have meat with every meal, generally because we would source that from like a farmer’s market or from the butchers, like free-range organic meat now. So it’s not so easy to like just nip into the supermarket and have meat for every dinner.”

Indeed, Charlie appears to enjoy the selection process and take satisfaction from shopping at the farmer's market on a weekend. But Bex struggles more with her choice to ethically source meat. It is clearly something she is committed to, but, perhaps because she is so committed to addressing the whole range of ethical concerns, she finds it difficult to shop ethically:

"I think knowing what's ethically right and wrong is a difficult thing to pin down... I bought something from a fish counter the other day and it wasn't totally certified, but nothing was... And yet I still bought it, knowing that, 'Oh my God!' thinking about air miles, just knowing that it's probably like farmed in mangroves and, you know... So there's a question mark about where stuff comes from, and I don't think as a consumer we have all the information to be able to make the right choices"

Whilst Bex and Charlie find the idea of consuming ethical meat of central importance to their lives, we must accept that using the life histories approach cannot tell us what proportion of the meat they consume actually conforms to their ideals. Indeed, they both appear to consume meat in restaurants, the source of which cannot be verified. And Bex admits that despite her beliefs she still consumes meat which is not ethical, and tries to reduce the discomfort at this knowledge by asserting that it is something she will be able to do better in the future, that she is limited in her ability to choose meat to buy now, and that there is not the information available to make an accurate decision (as in earlier example):

"And yet I still haven't completely changed, so that kind of – if I haven't completely changed, when what hope is there for everybody else? I'm definitely more aware now. I think I have... I feel guilty or I wonder what I should be doing. So yeah, maybe it will depend: you know, when I've got more money I'll see whether I actually do make the decisions I think I'll make... because I don't have the capacity to actually go and buy these things."

#But it does tell us a great deal about the attitudes of Bex and Charlie towards meat consumption, and the guilt that Bex feels at consuming meat which does not conform to her standards is a good indicator of the importance of the concept of ethical meat consumption to her. Viewing meat as either ethical or unethical is an interesting way in which the interviewees subjectively interpret meat consumption.

3.2.3 Origins and changes in meat consumption: The effects of structural conditions

From the interviews it was possible to suggest several ways in which particular patterns of food consumption may have emerged and changed across the lifetime. One of the key ways in which meat consumption patterns emerged and changed for these interviewees was due to various structural conditions; factors outside the control of the individual. These include societal, economic, and physical factors. For

example, the introduction of supermarkets and new types of food (mentioned earlier) and a change in storage and cooking methods over the lifetimes of the older interviewees appears to have influenced the way in which they consumed. Of greater relevance to the issue of meat consumption, however, are the influences of historical events, travel, routine, and financial constraints. These will be discussed in turn, drawing again upon evidence from the interview transcripts.

~~Historical events – WWII~~

World War II had a significant impact upon the diets of those living within the Britain. There was a great shortage of food, leading to the restrictions of rationing imposed by the Government of the time (Marr, 2008). Whilst other historical events in the lives of the women interviewed impacted upon their food consumption and practices, such as the three-day working week of 1974, none had such a large and uniform impact upon meat consumption as the war. It is a useful reminder of how meat consumption is determined not only by individual preferences, but by outside historical forces. Audrey, for example, recalls the size of the meat portions:

“[You] used to get ration book for your meat, and you used to have to stand in a queue for one sausage! I remember me mum standing for a sausage, one sausage each for us, which was like three, you know. And a little weeny bit of mince meat or steak, you know. I mean, a steak like they serve the steaks now in cafés, you’d never be able to buy one of those, you know.”

Given the smaller amounts of meat available to most (although rationing actually contributed to an increase in meat consumption for some), many were forced to adopt a low-meat diet and accordingly to adapt their cooking practices. Mary Herdman, for example, describes how her father made a joint of meat go a long way, saying: “Father was very good at carving meat thinly!”. For Muriel Margaret Laws, who was living in London at the time, her family moved away from certain types of meat in favour of fish, which was more readily available:

“But we used to eat a lot of fish. ‘Cos you got more fish in those days, you see. There were more fish around. And my grandparents would send us fish from Scotland. So it was all right if the post was good! *[they laugh]*”

She also describes receiving chicken from family living in the countryside, where meat was more available: “And then we had a cousin... And they worked on a farm, so they would sometimes send us a chicken. Which was good.” For many of the interviewees who either lived in the countryside or were evacuated there, their experiences there were described as a blessing. This was principally because of the high availability of meat, animal products, and fresh vegetables. This highlights the importance of meat products to these women, at least at the time at which the rationing was imposed:

“Well, it didn’t really – it didn’t affect *me* like some of the lasses down there at the Centre, because I was always on a farm, you see... I mean, we had chickens and we had eggs and we had milk, because of the cows. You know, we lived in the lap of luxury, really, you know! I mean, I can’t say that I ever went short. I really can’t. In fact, you know, I did quite well.” [Margaret rose stead]

“But of course Father had an allotment and grew his own fruit and veg in the allotment when we were in Hexham. But meat, of course, was more of a problem. But then we moved up to Bellingham. Well, there were farmers there: you could always get the... Father, being a farmer’s son, would enjoy going helping with the haymaking. Reward was often a packet of sausages and a half-dozen eggs, and potatoes, things like that. So we did get a little extra to what most folks would get” [Mary Herdman]

These quotes illustrate how, despite shortages of meat, which was a food that was highly valued at the time, people adapted to the low-meat diet and consumed different types of meat, or found ways to access it elsewhere.

~~Travel~~

The physical location in which a person grows up is also clearly an important determinant of food consumption and practices: people in different cultures and countries generally cook very differently, and there is often geographic regional variation within countries. This was also apparent within the present study. What was more interesting still, with regard to a change in meat consumption, was the way in which the interviewees were affected by travel between different regions and countries of the world. Sue Park, for example, being a Korean woman living in England, was very keen to try different types of food other than what she was used to:

“Actually, most Koreans... try to eat Korean food, but for me, I don’t care the Korean food or different kinds of food. Because I in the UK, so it’s a very good chance to experience other kinds of food and learn their food, how to make their food. So when I stay in the university... I invite my friends and they teach me how to make, for example, Thai food and Chinese food. And sometimes they come by my house and I teach them how to make Kimchi... when I try some interesting food in the food from Marks & Spencer, I try it and then I try make same dish on my own!”

This travelling experience appears to have greatly impacted upon her own food consumption patterns and cooking practices, and consequently those of her husband: she no longer eats just Korean food, but is greatly influenced by foods from the UK. What is also interesting is the exchange of food types and practices amongst her and her friends, who are also travellers bringing with them new types of food. Travel then appears to have significantly affected the food consumption of Sue Park.

Similarly, Val believes that the food preferences of her parents and parents-in-law were very much influenced by the amount of travelling done by them over their lives:

“...I think we eat very differently than when we were young. My mother-in-law died last year – she was always very keen to try out new things, and so she’d say, ‘Oh, what’s this?’ you know. So she was easy to feed, ‘cos she’d be quite happy to try out things, much more than my parents. But they’d lived abroad. My husband’s father was in the army, so they lived in Singapore and Gibraltar and Malaya and places like that, so they had tasted different sorts of culture and different sorts of food. So they were much more adventurous than my parents were.”

This also reflects the dichotomy between the traditional British diet and the more modern, exotic diet. There was a prevailing perception amongst the older interviewees that the generation of their parents were less willing to try new, foreign foods. For example, when asked what type of restaurants she went to as a child with her parents, Margaret answered: “Oh no, no, no Italians, no. No Chinese. I think my parents would be horrified, you know, they, they didn’t, er, think about er, foreign food, they, they just had plain English food.” But the interviewees aged 40+ very much perceived a change in their diets due to travel, both due to themselves and their families and due to those travelling to the UK. Muriel Margaret Laws, who has travelled a great deal in her lifetime, reflected:

“...cooking has changed because we’re a much smaller world, aren’t we. We didn’t have Indian restaurants, really; we didn’t have Chinese restaurants. So, and people didn’t go abroad, but they go abroad now to Italy and to France and to Greece, so therefore they bring back different recipes and they try different things. So I think that’s changed, yes. In a way that’s a good thing, ‘cos it’s good to try different [things].”

Travel, therefore, appears to have had a significant impact on the types of food, and consequently meat, consumed, and is something which is associated with the more modern diet, perhaps as a result of the availability of travel to the masses. Trying new foods is something which is highly valued by several of these women.

~~The set weekly diet: Influences of routine, lifestyle, and technology~~

Another structural condition which affected meat consumption in the older age groups was the tradition of having a set weekly diet, something which the interviewees attributed to various factors such as time constraints which were dictated by the routines and lifestyles of their mothers. Interestingly, Margaret, Maggie, Val and Mary Herdman each experienced a very similar set weekly diet as a child, despite differences in geographic location and apparent income. The weekly diet seemed to be determined primarily by the Sunday roast, which was examined earlier. According to the interviewees, meat would be roasted and leftovers kept for

the next day as cold meat, then minced on the next day to make another meal. Take for example extracts from the interviews with Mary Herdman and Margaret:

“...used to be the traditional joint on Sunday, cold on Monday, minced on Wednesday, and – minced on Tuesday, you know! Rissoles on Wednesday! That sort of thing. The joint went a long way.” [Mary Herdman]

“I mean, in those days it was... roast Sunday, cold meat Monday, mince on Tuesday, Wednesday was sausages, Thursday was whatever was left over from last time, and then Friday you had fish and Saturday you know, whatever, you know, something different. So, they were, I don't say they were set rigidly but if you had a roast dinner on Sunday there was always meat left over, so you, you know you didn't have freezers so you had to do something with it.” [Margaret]

Margaret attributed this pattern to the lack of a freezer, suggesting that the available technology appears to have been one reason for this pattern of meat-related practices. Another reason, also determined by technology, which influenced the lifestyle and routine of those who cooked, was discussed by Maggie. She attributed the need for this weekly diet to her mother's a lack of time when she has to hand-wash the family clothes using a mangle. Maggie said:

“What happened on a Sunday was Mum roasted a lot more potatoes and a lot more cabbage than we needed for Sunday lunch. So there was enough left over to do bubble and squeak on Monday... Yeah, 'cos Monday was washday, you see, so mums never had time to cook, did they. (No) So it was always cold meat and bubble and squeak. And then Tuesday it'd be shepherd's pie, wouldn't it!... Cottage pie, whatever you care to call it! A joint of beef would last three days, wouldn't it.”

What is also interesting is the way in which Maggie perceived this behaviour to be universal to all families, saying: “I think every single family in the country must have done that.” Indeed, this does seem to have been a popular practice amongst the families of the interviewees, in the absence of freezers and washing machines. But it was not mentioned by many in the age group, 40-60 (with the exception of Val), and none in the 20-30 age group. Indeed, none of the interviewees reported carrying out this practice today: many still had a roast dinner, but their food consumption did not appear to be influenced by this practice on other days of the week. This suggests a change away from this practice, something which Mary Herdman was keen to move from:

“...during the school holidays, when I was at home, you could tell the day of the week by what was on the table! And I vowed at the time my husband would never know what day of the week it was by what was on the table!”

~~Financial constraints~~

A factor which appeared to have affected the meat consumption of interviewees from each of the age groups at some point is the effect of financial constraints. Several of the interviewees believed that meat was more expensive than other food types and so they described themselves or others as reducing its consumption during times of financial difficulty. For example, Bex said: "So if I was living by myself, I probably wouldn't buy meat because I can't afford it" and Charlie said:

"We don't have meat with every meal, generally because we would source that from like a farmer's market or from the butchers, like free-range organic meat now... And I guess because it costs more 'cos of where we buy it from, it's more of a treat when we have meat."

Other interviewees changed the way they consumed meat, rather than cutting down. Jeanette, for example, talked about catering for herself as a student. To cater for the small budget she was living on, she ate meat which was less desirable and appetising than the more quality cuts of meat, and she had to change her cooking practices accordingly:

"I don't remember it being a problem. It was just that you had to find food that was cheap enough to manage on a grant. And I used to do things like go down to the butcher's and get a breast of lamb and stuff it, and roll it up and cook it for a long time so it wasn't too tough. And then I'd feed four people on it."

Similarly, Bex talked about how her diet was adapted as a child due to financial constraints experienced by the family, and described eating cheaper cuts of meat, which would have required different methods of cooking:

"I think it was probably dependent on finances, because, you know, as your finances change when you have kids, you don't have any money, so you obviously adapt what you're eating. So I'm definitely sure we eat better now than when we were actually younger in terms of the variety and what we're able with what ... and so forth. But I think at the time they made like steak and kidney pie and they used to do loads of different stuff with chicken livers – all the cheap meat. Not necessarily poor quality, but just the cuts that people don't often really want."

Aside from affecting the quantity and quality of meat consumed, financial constraints can also affect what type of meat is chosen. This was the case for Lina, who describes how the geographic location in which those in Colombia live affected the availability of certain types of meat (e.g. fish versus beef), which in turn affected the price for the meat in that region, and hence the amount of that type of meat consumed:

"...yes, we have any kind of meat: mainly pork, chicken and cod. And what else? Well, maybe fish in some places. Because that's the part of the country."

Because fish in my city, there is plenty. Because I am from the due-north, the mountain, people ... around the thing, they eat mostly fish, mostly fish. But in my place we eat mostly meat, because of the price. It's very [cheap]"

Meat consumption and practices then appear to be affected by financial constraints in various ways, as well as other structural conditions such as travel and historical events such as WWII, and outside factors which have created a routine and weekly diet.

3.2.4 Cultural Conditions

~~Attitudes towards vegetarianism and low meat consumption~~

Although meat often seems to have served as part of a traditional diet, for some interviewees meat consumption is not something which they engage in regularly. For Charlie and Bex, this was partly due to their belief in the need to consume ethical meat. But for the other interviewees, this did not appear to be due to beliefs and none of the interviewees were vegetarians. Indeed, whilst there was often low meat consumption, vegetarianism was not a label that any were willing to adopt. For example, whilst Margaret was keen to point out that she had a healthy diet with a high vegetable content, she was unwilling to label these meals as vegetarian: "I do cook vegetarian meals as well, well veg, not vegetarian meals cos that's, but vegetable meals. Things like vegetable lasagne, er, vegetable curry." Later in the interview, when talking about the meals she cooked for her children, she again corrects her usage of the term, as though it were not something that were socially acceptable to say, being perhaps something which would reflect badly on her parental duties: "Um, not so much fish, cos they're not all keen on fish, but vegetarian, vegetable meals as well".

Similarly, when discussing the diet which her Korean mother followed in the village in which she lived, Sue Park makes the distinction between eating lots of vegetables and being vegetarian. Although she appears proud of the mainly vegetable diet her mother followed, given that it represented to her the region in which her mother had lived (meat was hard to source because of the geographical location), she also points out that her mother is not vegetarian: "So my mum used to make us some dishes made by the vegetables. Because in her town she can only eat the vegetables. So she make everything is vegetable! Even though she is not a vegetarian".

Interestingly, one interviewee, Maggie, actively disliked eating meat, even though the practice did not, and still does not, align with the social norms of her family:

"I never used to eat meat, so I didn't bother about it. I never ate meat until I was 27... I didn't like it! Didn't like it at all. I never liked meat. The only thing I ever ate was chicken or fish. And I really don't like meat now, do I? [to her husband]... My mum used to think it was weird, because my mum was a

cook in a hotel. So she could never understand why I would never eat meat. I mean, my family are all big meat-eaters.”

But she was not ashamed of this rejection of meat, rather it aligned with her sense of individuality and the determined, unabashed personality she projected. And yet, she also seems to reject the label of vegetarianism, quipping about the cooking she did for her children: “they don't seem to have come to any harm. I haven't got any vegetarians in the family [laughs]”. For Maggie then, vegetarianism is still not socially acceptable, despite her largely vegetable-based diet.

In contrast, Muriel Margaret Laws seemed proud that her daughter had been exposed to vegetarianism through their Chinese nanny. Muriel was happy that her daughter had experienced many different foods in their travels, and she seemed to have a more liberal view of food, for which eating and cooking of was seen more as a cultural experience:

“We called her Yu. And she would always bring her food in three little tins. You know, it was vegetarian – she was a Buddhist, actually... And when it was lunchtime, Alex didn't want to eat with us – she would always go through and sit with Yu. And Yu would roll up little bits of rice and vegetables and pop it in her mouth! [laughs] So she always liked that food. And then when the men – sometimes they would come round the streets with little barrows selling sometimes fruit, sometimes pineapples that they'd chopped up, or... food like chow mein and soups, and she would rush out and buy some and bring it in so we could try it.”

Muriel was also happy to adopt the term vegetarian in relation to her own food choices, which seemed to be in line with the liberal and culturally-open identity she projected of herself throughout the interview. She says: “Actually, I like vegetarian food. And quite often, if we go out for a meal, I will often choose the vegetarian option”. This would suggest that attitudes and values towards meat consumption and vegetarianism are very culturally specific and determined by the social norms that the women had been in contact with, as well as the identity they wished to project. It seems that those interviewees who were unwilling to adopt the term of vegetarianism believed that it was not yet the social norm to do so, and it was not an identity they wished to align themselves with. But whilst they do not adopt the term in reference to their own food practices, they are happy to adopt vegetarian practices. Indeed, eating vegetables seemed to be considered to be a key part of more modern diet, as discussed earlier.

~~Gender relations~~

Clear gender differences in the attitudes towards a low-meat or vegetarian diet were also identified in the interviews. Whilst eating less meat appears to be the norm for many of these women, it is generally perceived that the men in their families need meat and/or that they would find this diet unacceptable. For example, following on

from the quote from Margaret Muriel Laws, where she talks about enjoying a vegetarian diet, she goes on to say:

“But [sighs] – and I do sometimes cook vegetarian, but my husband prefers to have something that has meat or fish with it. And although he doesn’t mind now and again having something that’s completely vegetable-based or pulses and things – well, in fact he loves pulses. For him, I think, a meal is something that’s got meat or fish in it, really.”

This is in line with the research of DEFRA (2009) suggesting that meat consumption is closely aligned with male identity. Similarly, although Maggie herself dislikes meat, she is proud of the carnivorous appetite of her sons: “And my own children are –my kids love meat... My boys absolutely adore meat!”. And Bex says of her boyfriend: “Actually I’ve been trying to get him off it [meat], ‘cos he believes that unless you have meat in a meal it’s not a meal, or has believed that.”

4. Summary and Conclusions

This paper examined meat consumption and practices amongst the thirteen women living in the UK who volunteered for life history interviews. Four main themes were identified: 1) the functions of meat; 2) the subjective interpretations of meat; 3) the structural conditions which explain the origins and changes in meat consumption; and 4) the past and present cultural conditions.

Meat consumption and practices appeared to change greatly throughout the lives of the interviewees, being affected by structural conditions such as WWII, travel to and from the UK, routine and the types of technology available, as well as financial constraints. These are likely to be just some of the factors which can result in a change in meat consumption, based upon those which the interviewees believed affected meat consumption most. There are likely to be many more factors, which highlights the importance of examining more than one aspect of meat consumption and examining the historical, social and individual influences over time, rather than limiting studies to the present day.

Of the subjective interpretations of food identified across the interviews, three main interpretations stood out for their relevance to meat. The first was the way in which meat had a central role in representing traditional meals. In addition, there was an apparent dichotomy between simple (traditional) and sophisticated (modern) foods, which related to perceived generational differences. But in actuality there were many similarities between the women across the various age groups, with similar transitions from traditional meals to more varied, exotic, and low-meat meals in the present day.

Meat also served several different functions in the lives of the women interviewed. It acted as a catalyst for social relations, where families were drawn together by important meat-centric meals such as the Sunday roast or the Christmas dinner. Meat also denoted status, and was used to display cooking capabilities. Finally, meat was also viewed as a necessary addition to the diet for good health, and contrastingly, as something which may negatively impact upon health.

In terms of the prevailing cultural conditions, there were interesting attitudes towards the concepts of the low-meat diet and of vegetarianism. Whereas eating little meat was seen as part of a modern diet, and was highly acceptable to the women, vegetarianism was seen as something of a taboo. Eating less meat was also something which appeared to be at odds with the identities of the men in the lives of some of the women, something which is concordant with previous research (DEFRA, 2009).

Meat consumption and the practices which are associated with it are very complex and intertwined. There is not one factor alone which can be used to understand how and why we consume meat in the way we do, and these factors clearly extend beyond the individual to social, historical, and political influences. If we are to examine meat consumption in the present day alone then we are to miss a great deal of information about how consumption and practices begin and change over time. This knowledge is crucial if one is to try to encourage more sustainable and therefore lower-meat diets. The life histories methodology has limitations in that it can only gather information about the perceptions and subjective interpretations of their lives and diets, but the value of this information should not be underestimated, as this study has hopefully demonstrated.

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