**Chapter 1**

**Revisiting ‘Eating Out’ – Understanding 20 years of change in the practice in three English cities.**

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**Abstract**

In 2015 and 2016, we took what is a rare opportunity in the social sciences to re-visit the study ‘Eating Out’, which was first conducted in 1995 (Warde and Martens, 2000). This study explored from the point of view of diners the increasingly popular practice of eating main meals in commercial establishments. To explore changes and continuities in such a practice over time, we take instruction from the technique of what Burawoy (2003) calls the ‘focused revisit’. This involves revisiting sites studied at an earlier time, but is distinguishable from a re-analysis or the updating of previous studies. The purpose of a re-visit is to understand and explain variation in what is observed, without being enslaved by the rules that govern ‘replicable’ research. By applying principles of an ethnographic revisit to a mixed-method study of ‘eating out’, and ‘eating in’, we were able to re-engage with the topics and literatures arising (e.g. sustainable consumption, eating out as a practice), rather than solely updating the 1995 analysis with the same purposes in mind. This chapter explores the logic of revisiting ‘Eating Out’ and reflects upon the prospects and challenges afforded by this exciting opportunity. Taking instruction from Glucksmann’s (2000) approach, we ‘open up’ the research process and discuss the ‘in between’ stage, between data collection and presentation of findings, to share a number of concrete examples of the challenges of a sociological revisit.

**Introduction**

The original Eating Out projectwas a study of the consumption of food outside the home, based on extensive original research carried out in England in the 1990s (Warde and Martens 2000). In 2015, we took what is a rare opportunity in the social sciences to re-visit the study, returning to the same three cities – London, Preston, and Bristol – to explore changes and continuities in such a practice over time. As will be shown in this chapter, adaptation of the methodology is the result of balancing the requirements of internal validity demanded of repeat studies with re-use of research instruments adapted to the contemporary landscape of market provision and social practice.

A focus upon practices marks a theoretical turn in the sociology of consumption, whereby the kinds of expressions of individual identity play announced by the ‘cultural turn’ make way for accounts that gives less prominence to the agency of social actors, proposing instead that performances of a practice, such as eating, relies more upon automated and practical senses of reasonable action than calculation or deliberation. The unthinking ways in which social actors repeat performances and adjust these according to conditions demanded by various situations, leads practice sympathetic accounts to suggest that people are the carriers of practices, rather than as conscious deliberative actors. This ‘practice turn’ (Schatzki, 2001; Warde, 2016) marks a new phase in sociological research on consumption, and indeed, on eating (Warde, 2016). Eating is understood to be highly complex, weakly regulated and routinised activity performed by social actors, which in turn create the structures upon which these performances are reproduced. Such a turn to practice brings greater theoretical sophistication to a long tradition of research that has framed food as a lens through which to view other domains of social life (Douglas, 1966) – commensality (Fischler, 2011), gender relations (DeVault, 1991; Martens, 1997), sociability (Jacobs and Scholliers, 2003; Julier, 2013; Díaz-Méndez and García-Espejo, 2014), social differentiation and taste (Mennell, 1985; Warde, 1997; Johnston and Baumann, 2010; Cappellini et al., 2016; Ray, 2016; Paddock, 2016), deprivation and social exclusion (Wills and O’Connell, 2018), and many more. Understood as a practice, eating is brought to bear as an analytic concept in itself. We extend this lens to the practice of dining out: a field relatively understudied in the UK with the exception of Burnett’s (2004) social history of the practice, and Lane’s (2010; 2018).

To explore changes and continuities in the practice of eating out over time, we take inspiration from the technique of what Burawoy (2003) calls the ‘focused revisit’. This involves revisiting sites studied at an earlier time, but is distinguishable from a re-analysis or the updating of previous studies. The purpose of a revisit is to explore and explain variation in what is observed, without being enslaved by the rules that govern ‘replicable’ research. By applying the principles of an ethnographic revisit to a mixed-method study of ‘eating out’, and ‘eating in’, we were able to re-engage with the topics highlighted by the first visit, but bring to it fresh theory and literature to deal with conceptual priorities of today. In this case, we frame eating out in practice theoretical terms, and also address debates in sustainable consumption. To do so, we inevitably open-up dialogue between the 1995 and 2015 studies, noting interconnections, developments, and departures.

As such, this chapter is mainly methodological in nature. However, we hope that you – the reader – will find it a refreshing change from textbook research methodology, which Glucksmann (2000, p.1). says focus ‘overwhelmingly on problems, ethics and practicalities of collecting material but offer much less guidance on what to do with it’. We act upon this provocation by presenting a more dialectical and much messier phase in the research process, a stage that is rarely exposed to external scrutiny. We expose the points ‘in between’ data collection and the polished presentation of findings, which often have the appearance of ‘fully constituted knowledge’. More specifically, this chapter explores the logic of revisiting ‘Eating Out’ and reflects upon the prospects and challenges afforded by this exciting opportunity. It elucidates a number of the challenges - over which there was much head-scratching and agonising - in conducting a sociological revisit, an opportunity which is rare, thus making methodological waters even more unchartered.

We proceed by outlining Burawoy’s (2003) theory of reflexive ethnography, which we apply to our combinations of interview and survey techniques of data collection. Not presuming reader familiarity with the original project, we begin by outlining the 1995 research design. With this acting as a backdrop, we explain the design of the 2015 revisit, underscoring points of departure, while emphasising challenges encountered in combining two datasets. With all the ingredients measured out, so to speak, we proceed to demonstrate ‘in between’ stages of research by discussing two concrete examples (1) the meaning of eating out, and (2) ethnicity and ethnic style cuisine. These two examples demonstrate the challenge of synthesising material – both qualitative and quantitative, from 1995 and 2015 – that very often did not neatly fit together. We conclude the chapter by returning to Burawoy’s (2003) four principles of reflexivity.

**The logic of re-visiting**

For Burawoy (2003) the focused revisit is epistemologically grounded by principles of reflexive ethnography. This approach, itself inspired by Bourdieusian approaches, seeks to ‘disentangle the movements of the external world from the researcher’s own shifting involvement with that same world, all the while recognising that the two are not independent’ (p.646). Concerns about realism over constructivism – whether the changes we observe in the social world are the result of forces external to the researcher, or are the product of how the observer understands and constructs that world through the theoretical lenses they bring to the field - are balanced by reflexive engagement with the interaction of both inevitabilities. Crucially, these principles of reflexivity are as applicable to mixed methods research design as they are to ethnography.

A ‘revisit’ involves returning to sites studied at an earlier time but is distinguishable from a re-analysis or the updating of previous studies. That is, rather than controlling the conditions of the research to the extent that we are permitted only to develop debates in line with the theoretical orientation of the prior study, the research design is flexible in so far as the researchers may look backwards to the past as well as at the present with fresh theoretical lenses, should they wish to do so. This has indeed been common practice in anthropology, where ethnographers return to the sites of classic studies – studied by themselves or by others - conducting empirical fieldwork anew, and systematically comparing findings to those of their disciplinary ancestors. They even return to their own sites after sufficient time has elapsed perhaps because events of social, economic, political, or cultural significance render a revisit necessary or important.

Revisits, Burawoy (2003) argues, vary in purpose along a continuum of constructivist and realist motivations. The first, of a constructivist form, he calls the ‘refutational’ - where the researcher aims to challenge the claims made by the prior study. The second is concerned with furthering understandings generated by their predecessor, thus ‘reconstructing’ elements of the prior study. Revisits of a realist kind are incentivised by ‘empiricist’ and/or ‘structuralist’ aims. Whiffs of constructivist concerns may indeed permeate revisits of a realist kind, but Burawoy reminds us that these tend to focus upon external forces at work in transforming societies. In this way, studies guided by ‘empiricist’ goals may consider the changes and continuities evident between two time periods, while ‘structuralist’ revisits may concern themselves with major events; from wars, political upheaval, famines, extreme weather and natural disasters. Such propensity to revisit our own work, and the work of others, Burawoy argues, is relatively uncommon in sociology. Indeed, we, as sociologists, might learn from anthropologists’ readiness to revisit studies central to their own canon.

Doing so, we do not reject the findings of the 1995 study but aim to bring (some) new theories to bear upon its findings by revisiting the same places once again, and by turning once more to both the raw data as well as interpretations presented from this work in 1995. We note there are realist concerns to be addressed when accounting for continuities and change between the two periods, including the 2008 financial crisis; subsequent austerity; and the rise of the casual dining phenomenon within the restaurant industry. Mintel (2015) note the increase in eating out, but the reduction in spending across the sector, as ‘meal deals’, ‘buy-one-get-one-free’ offers, and ‘early bird’ set menus provide opportunities for many whose beleaguered budgets would otherwise see an end to any superfluous spending. Indeed, Deloitte (2011) reported that the informal dining out sector was set to continue growing, an industry category that contained: informal waited service establishments; fast food and take-aways; coffee shops and sandwich bars; retail ‘grab and go’s’ such as the Spar and M&S Food; pubs; workplace canteens; shopping and leisure centres; and establishments linked to travel such as RoadChef and Upper Crust. Their popularity no doubt bred further market investment in the casual dining restaurant as an ideal type. Foodservice publications point overall to the value for money desired by customers facing cut-backs in spending on leisure activities, but who still wish to find ways to go out and enjoy themselves.

Eating out, albeit in less formal, inexpensive ways, is understood as one such occasion for ‘getting out’ on a budget, and the businesses able to capitalise in such a way were forecast to be the most likely to survive the recession following the 2008 financial crisis. While we take seriously the potential impact of the financial crisis upon the practice of eating, the market has been slowly variegating and expanding over a longer period. Buying meals out in restaurants, hotels and cafes has become increasingly common over the last 40 years in Europe and North America (Cheng et al., 2007; Cabiedes-Miragaya, 2017; Díaz-Méndez and García-Espejo, 2017; Holm et al., 2016; Kjaernes; 2001, Levenstein, 2003). Recent studies across Europe and the US tell more about up-market restaurants and their oft-times celebrity chefs (Lane, 2011; Leschziner, 2015; Rao Monin and Durand, 2003), but with limited information about customers. We know rather a lot about what is cooked and sold in restaurants and cafes across the globe (Berris and Sutton, 2007; Jacobs and Scholliers, 2003; Ma et al., 2006), there being a special interest in the significance of the spread of commercial enterprises purveying different national, ethnic and regional cuisines and their connection with processes of migration (Berris and Sutton, 2007; Panayi, 2008; Ray, 2016). There is a minor interest in food connoisseurs in Canada (Johnston and Baumann, 2010) and a somewhat dated literature on the more basic experience of eating out in Europe and the US (Finkelstein, 1991; Wood, 1995; Warde and Martens, 2000; Warde, 2016). We understand that the recursive dynamics through which social practices are (re)produced are evident in the interaction of market structures and consumer behaviours. Indeed, separating changing practices from changing external environments is an interpretive issue we are still grappling with, along with internal problems of measurement, external/internal problems of interpretation and shifting meanings of the practice of eating out itself.

In the section that follows, we present the research designs of the 1995 and 2015 studies of Eating Out by way of introducing the data we are working with at present in our ‘revisit’.

**The preceding 1995 study**

‘Eating Out’ was first conducted in 1995 (Warde and Martens, 2000). It was one of 16 projects, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, forming the research programme ‘*The Nation’s Diet: the social science of food choice’*. At the time, research had been concerned with the nutritional rather than the social aspects of eating out and little was known about eating out as entertainment and as means to display taste, status and distinction. Warde and Martens (2000) conducted one of the first social scientific investigations on the nature and experiences of eating out.

The 1995 research design entailed two phases of data collection. In the first, Martens conducted interviews with 33 interviewees, from 30 households, in diverse circumstances living in Preston and the surrounding area during the autumn of 1994. The sampling was modelled on DeVault (1991) and they sought to speak with ‘principal food providers’: that is, ‘anyone, man or woman, who performed a substantial proportion of the feeding work in the household’ (2000, p.228). Reflecting the prevailing gender division in domestic work, 28 women and 5 men were interviewed (three men were interviewed on their own, and two were present in a joint interview with their partner). Concentration on Preston, a city in Lancashire in North West England, was opportunistic but there was no reason to think Preston highly unusual. Interviewees were recruited through various organisations including a leisure centre, a community association, a tennis club, an environmental group, a primary school, a trade union branch, and a national DIY chain store.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted *first* because it was thought that in the absence of prior social scientific enquiry it would otherwise be difficult to construct informative questions for a survey instrument. Interviewees were asked questions about aspects of eating at home including descriptions of household routines and distribution of food preparation tasks. Questions about eating out included the interviewees’ understanding of the term, frequency and reasons for using various places and information details about recent eating out experiences. Preliminary analysis was undertaken on the semi-structured interview data in order to design a questionnaire for the second phase. Thereafter, the interviews were analysed in considerable detail, focusing on shared understandings which defined eating events and differential orientations and attitudes towards eating out.

In phase two of data collection, 1001 people aged 18 to 65 were surveyed in *three* cities in England; London, Bristol and Preston. These cities were chosen to offer contrasts of socio-demographic composition and, putatively, cultural ambience. Preston was included as representing a northern free-standing city without any particularly eccentric characteristics. London was selected in anticipation that its unique features, including its diverse market and greater volume of provision, would prompt distinctive consumption behaviour. Central and suburban areas were chosen to illustrate potential differences between areas of the metropolis. Bristol was selected as an example of a southern, non-metropolitan city with some claim to be culturally heterogeneous. Since no three cities would be representative of all others in England, these sites were deemed as satisfactory as any. The survey was undertaken in April 1995 and was administered to a quota sample which matched respondents to the overall population of diverse local sub areas of the cities by age, sex, ethnicity, class and employment status. Despite not being a nationally representative sample, there is no reason to consider the survey biased in any particular way as a basis for an initial portrait of the practice in an English context.

Survey questions sought to ascertain each respondent’s frequency of eating out, types of outlet visited, attitudes to eating out, extensive detail about the nature of the most recent meal eaten away from home, and rudimentary information about domestic routines. Sociodemographic data was also elicited in order to explore variation by class, income, age, gender, education, place of residence, and so forth. Analysis of this cross-sectional survey data provided a *snapshot* of the practice of eating out in 1995.

**Mixing methods**

When conducting research using multiple data sources and methods the challenge is ‘to maintain the integrity of the single study, compared to inadvertently permitting the study to decompose into two or more parallel studies’ (Yin 2006, p.41). We encountered this challenge not only when working with and fitting together survey and interview data, but also when deciding when and how to synthesise data from 1995 and 2015. Commitment to the logic of Burawoy’s ‘revisit’ provides some safeguard against the study disintegrating into parallel studies. The aim of the revisit is not simply to provide an update to the earlier study – presenting findings from two parallel studies, of ‘then’ and ‘now’ – but in our ‘revisit’ we maintain the integrity of a single study by returning to the original raw data and fully incorporating it into the extant research process. Furthermore, there are several ways in which this project illustrates the mixing of quantitative and qualitative methods. The integration of these two methodologies is the result of putting the interpretations of provisional analysis from qualitative in-depth interviews – interviewees represent a nested sample of the 2015 survey respondents – into conversation with the survey analysis, and vice versa. Triangulating our data sources and analysis in this way, is, however, more than a means of simply corroborating results by making the same observations in different settings. Rather, Brannen (2005) suggests four possibilities generated by triangulation that go beyond corroboration. These are named: ‘elaboration/expansion’; ‘initiation’; ‘complementarity’; and ‘contradiction’. There were many instances in which speculation from the interview data informed a foray of the survey data, both 2015 and harmonised, which then fed back into further work with the qualitative data; conversely, interesting and even seemingly uninteresting pictures painted using numerical data prompted further engagement with qualitative data for explanation or repudiation. We later illustrate this dialogic process of analysing data collected via such a mixed method research strategy, in relation to questions of taste, ethnic cuisine, and demographic change.

In 2015, we remain faithful to the skeleton of the original research design by visiting the same cities and conducting two-phases data collection, but begin instead with a survey, followed by in-depth semi-structured household interviews.

*Survey data*

In the first phase of data collection, in April 2015, 1101 respondents were surveyed in London, Preston and Bristol. The original rationale for selecting these three cities still resonates (that is, contrasts of socio-demographic composition and putative cultural ambience), despite the significant population and provision changes within these cities since 1995. The survey administered asked almost identical questions as previously, pertaining to five thematic areas: (1) eating at home, social activities, division of labour; (2) eating out and takeaway food; (3) the last main meal eaten (at a public establishment, or at somebody else’s home); (4) domestic entertaining; (5) socio-demographic questions e.g. to ascertain class trajectory, social connections and cultural capital. The few modifications made to the survey were to suit market, technological, and socio-cultural realities of a social world of eating twenty years on, such as; the broadening of types and styles of cuisine available, the advent of the internet, commonplace use of mobile telephone devices, and the commensurate rise of social media communication platforms, which in 1995 belonged more to the realm of sci-fi imaginaries than social realities. In this way, the same - or similar - information has been asked to a different sample of individuals each time. A final question was added to the survey in 2015: we asked respondents whether it would be alright to contact them again, for a follow up interview.

In 2015, the survey was again administered to a quota sample to reflect the demographic profile of the cities studied. Census Output Areas (OAs), typically comprising around 150 households, were selected at random from across the relevant Local Authorities in proportion to size. Output Areas were stratified by the proportion of residents in social grade AB, using estimated social grade from the Census. Interviewers were given quotas based on age and working status interlocked with sex, to reflect the demographic profile of the OAs. While respondents to the 1995 survey were aged 18-65 years, an additional quota of 100 respondents above the age of 65 were surveyed in 2015 to better capture the ageing population (Leach et al., 2013). When conducting analysis of change between survey years, these additional cases are removed but are included when exploring 2015 data independently, thus securing internal validity of comparison while also fortifying the sample for the purposes of understanding the practice of eating out in 2015.

*Survey harmonisation*

Given that the aim of the study was to revisit the original study it was necessary not only to analyse the 2015 survey data - making straightforward comparisons with the survey findings from 1995 - but to also reanalyse the 1995 survey data. Therefore, we combined the two surveys to create a repeated cross-sectional dataset and analysed data cross-sectionally – by looking at one survey year – and combined for an analysis of patterns of change over time.

While the survey administered in 2015 asked almost identical questions as in 1995, there were a number of differences between the two surveys, thus, creating a single dataset was not a simple task of constructing a variable to indicate survey year and appending responses from 2015 to those of 1995. Some problems of comparability require more sophisticated adjustments than others. From least to most complex, we experienced the following issues: (1) Where question wording and response alternatives were identical, it was not always the case that variables were measured and categorised in the same way in both years and (e.g. for the variable indicating ‘city’, the value 2 did not represent Preston in both years). (2) Some questions found in the 1995 survey were *not repeated* in 2015 and (3) new questions were introduced in 2015 that had not been asked in 1995. To deal with the second and third points we, very simply, assigned a value to the coding scheme to indicate ‘the question was not asked in the survey’ and, thus, data was missing. The most critical of practical steps, requiring the most sophisticated of adjustments for comparability was that (4) often the question wording remained the same across surveys, but in 2015 the response alternatives were amended. Response categories differed because there were *additional* response items, *disaggregated* response alternatives to enable a more detailed response or an altogether *different* set of response alternatives.

In many ways, the task of harmonising data is a meticulous, practical task; but this fourth set of practical adjustments (dealing with additional, disaggregated, and altogether different response alternatives) provoked considerable reflexive engagement in what it means to conduct a focused revisit. Before presenting a detailed discussion of this reflection in the next section, in our discussion of three concrete examples (‘Making sense of change’), we explain our approach to qualitative data collection and analysis.

*The in-depth interviews*

At the time of the first study, relatively little was known about the practice of eating out from an academic point of view. Some excellent monographs describe owning and working in restaurants in the US, (Fine, 1996; Leidner, 1993) and the UK (Gabriel, 1988). The 30 qualitative interviews - conducted in 1995 only with Prestonians - served as a basis for the mixed methods research design, but to also gather understandings that would consequently frame the survey from the point of view of respondents.

Twenty years later, the primary purpose of conducting in-depth interviews was a little different. In the 2015 revisit, the survey was conducted first (April 2015) and in-depth interviews followed in January 2016. 31 in-depth follow-up interviews were conducted across all three cities; ten in each city, with an accidental extra interview conducted in Bristol. Interviewees were invited to speak of the kinds of routines that shape both the typical and atypical weeks/weekends. We asked about frequency of the various eating events mentioned, about their dining companions, as well as their tastes and disgusts alike. We ended by inviting interviewees to speak about their experiences of both entertaining others to meals in their own homes and of being a guest in the homes of others. Conducting a large-scale survey and then subsequently conducting in-depth interview with a small number of people who had completed the survey means that the interview sample was nested within survey sample. Before even stepping foot into the in-depth interview, we knew a considerable amount about each interviewee: socio-demographics; class trajectory; their tastes; and much more. The explicit request for specific pieces of information using the survey method elicits information that may not have emerged otherwise and certainly would not have emerged in systematic ways across each narrative account. It allowed us to piece together quantitative responses and qualitative accounts, albeit with the proviso that these accounts were collected nearly 12 months apart.

Having asked respondents at the end of the survey whether it would be alright to contact the respondent again for follow-up interview, we had a (seemingly) overwhelming positive response from 731 of our 1101 survey respondents (66 percent). From these responses, we were able to select a pool of interviewees to suit the needs of the revisit. Rather than speak to the ‘principal food providers’ as in 1995, responses to attitudinal and other relevant questions guided the selection of interviewees. For example, given that we are interested in learning about how eating in and out relate to other modes of provision, we avoided contacting respondents who claim never to eat out, or have little to no interest in food or cooking.

Having access to a pool of 731 respondents does not, however, promise the responsiveness of those whom are selected. Indeed, closely defined criteria - which in our case include a mixture of ages, ethnicities, genders, class trajectory, and enthusiasm for food and cooking – reduces this pool to a pond of less than 100. Reducing this pond to a puddle is the commonplace matter of attrition (Edwards and Holland, 2013), as the final number depends upon willingness of potential respondents, wrong telephone numbers, diary conflicts, and final ‘no-shows’. As one of us arrived at the agreed place and time of interview, ringing once or twice on the front door bell, the interviewee flies from the back door and into a waiting taxi! Furthermore, while attempting to speak with people with a range of socio-demographic profiles for interview, at times the survey respondent’s information - used to inform our selection and the knowledge of which we entered the interview setting - had become outdated by the time of interview. Major life-course events - such as relationship break-down, critical illness, and childbirth - illuminated conversations about routines shaping their everyday lives, and change therein.

The next section demonstrates the challenge of synthesising material – both qualitative and quantitative, data from 1995 and 2015 – that very often did not neatly fit together. We discuss the processes using three concrete examples (1) the meaning of eating out; (2) ethnicity and (3) ethnic style cuisine. In this discussion, we aim to ‘open up’ the research process of conducting a focused revisit, showing the messy and sometimes agonising in-between stage between data collection and ‘fully constituted knowledge’ (Glucksmann, 2000).

**Making sense of change: Frequency, shifting meanings, expanding tastes**

*Frequency*

To measure frequency of eating out, the survey asked in both years about the number of times the respondents think they have eaten out within the last 12 months and ask many more questions to gather detail about the *last time* they ate a main meal away from home. The survey contains two different means to estimate the frequency of eating out among the sample – a retrospective estimate about behaviour in the last year[[1]](#endnote-1) and a report of the last occasion when the respondent ate a main meal away from home[[2]](#endnote-2). Both questions were asked in both survey years. Given that the question wording and response alternatives were identical in 1995 and 2015, one would be forgiven for assuming that analysing change in frequency of eating out over the 20-year period was a straightforward task.

Common sense assumptions shared with us by many in the run-up to the beginning of the project, anticipated dramatic, or if conservative, at least, a discernible increase in frequency of eating out over this period. On the contrary, our quantitative analysis suggested remarkable continuity, with the frequency of eating out remaining relatively steady. Uneasy about this contradiction between our expectation and empirical findings, we entered into a dialogic process that entailed returning to the interpretation of 1995 qualitative data, looking afresh at 2015 interview data, taking insight from each to reinterpret our quantitative findings and inspire further quantitative analysis with the harmonised dataset. This led us to the conclusion that the meaning of the practice has somewhat evolved since 1995, which we discuss in greater detail in the section titled ‘ordinary’ meals out’, below.

To gauge whether features of an event that we would call the ‘main meal of the day’ are shared by our interviewees, we asked what the term ‘main meal’ meant to them, generating the following understandings held in common:

*‘For me it would probably be the meal you have in the evening after work or whatever, that you have with whoever else is in your house really’ - Felicity, Preston.*

*‘For us it’s always a cooked meal as a family in the evening. Sundays might be lunchtime but usually it is a main meal in the evening’ - Nicola, Bristol.*

*‘So for me a main meal is probably the largest portion size, the most calories, probably hot and I’d probably only have one main meal a day, which for me is probably dinner, unless I know that I’m meeting friends for lunch or I have a special lunch date, otherwise dinner to me would be the main meal’ – Penny, London.*

<Insert Figure 1.1 here>

Figure 1 implies some discrepancy between retrospective recall and more recent experience. If we extrapolate from the reported last meal the mean frequency of eating out in Spring 2015 was probably at least once in ten days, whereas the retrospective estimate would suggest approximately once every 17 days. Only respondents whose last meal was in a restaurant are included when plotting when the last main meal was eaten out (n=813); to create a comparable estimate, respondents who never ate out were not included when plotting frequency of eating out (n=1034). Thus the mean, median and modal response to the retrospective estimate of frequency of eating at a restaurant was ‘monthly’, whereas last occasion registered ‘fortnightly’ as mean and median, and ‘within the last seven days’ being the modal response. 46 per cent of respondents reported that their last meal out was within the last seven days.

There are several possible reasons why these estimates vary, the most probable being that respondents recall smaller and less significant occasions when asked about their last main meal away from home, whilst their longer-term memory alights on more significant events. Moreover, the in-depth interview offers extended opportunities to recall eating events, and thus sheds some light on what we call the shifting meaning and normalisation of eating out. Additionally, there can be external explanations for variation – such as market shifts resulting from the 2008 financial crisis creating new opportunities to eat out, that commensurately adjust the expectations of eating out, as well as consumers finding occasions to suit these opportunities - which are not solely the result of researchers’ interpretations. The explanation we give for the continuity of frequency of eating out is found in conversation between the survey and interview data, where the type of occasions reported, and the meanings attributed to these suggest slow evolution in the practice of eating out. Indeed, we are persuaded that, as argued elsewhere by Oriel Sullivan (2004; 1997), that while the metaphors used to epitomise the scale of transformation characteristic of late modern ‘runaway’ societies - as characterised by Beck et al.’s (1994) dramatic ‘juggernauts’, and ‘volcanoes’ of change - fluctuations and variations in everyday practices are small and evolutionary. Such evolution is meaningful, and, we argue, has implications for the performances of practices and the social relations which are produced and are reproduced by them. Let us explain a little more.

*‘Ordinary’ meals out*

In 1995, Warde and Martens characterised eating out as ‘a specific socio-spatial activity, it involves commercial provision, the work involved is done by somebody else, it is a social occasion, it is a special occasion, and it involves eating a meal’ (2000, p.46-7). Importantly, ‘eating out’ did not include breakfast or snacks, it was associated with purchase in the commercial sector, and it was, in individual interviewees’ words ‘”a change from the everyday”’ and most typically “a special occasion, dining, in a restaurant or a café, or something”’ (ibid, p.45). Events were considered an exception to the quotidian, a source of pleasure and a highly valued opportunity for social interaction.

With this in mind, we sought to characterise the meaning of eating out in 2015, working with the suspicion carried since conducting these interviews in person - that what might characterise a ‘special’ event, or indeed ‘just a social occasion’ - which are terms used to capture reasons for eating out in the survey instrument – may have somewhat altered. Using Nvivo 11, one of us had already carved the data into numerous themes, under which ‘reasons for eating out’ refined further the range of reasons and purposes described by interviewees. In this way, a picture or vignette of the continuum of reasons for eating out on behalf of each interviewee emerged, leading us to one of our first findings; that of normalisation and simplification (see Paddock, et al., 2017, for a full account).

To begin with, asking interviewees about the kinds of event that characterise ‘eating out’ elicited the following kinds of responses:

*‘Probably a restaurant, eating out. It doesn’t really matter, as long as you’re sitting down. I wouldn’t count a fast food chain as eating out, that would be more of a snack, like you’d get a Subway or a McDonald’s. I wouldn’t turn ‘round to my Mrs and say I’d take her out for a meal and then take her to Subway’ - Tyler, Preston.*

*‘Not eating in your home. Or a close family member’ - Nadine, Bristol.*

*‘Dinner. Hot meal at a sit-down restaurant’ - Douglas, London.*

These responses illustrate the ease with which interviewees were able to define this practice. There is consensus about what counts as eating out, the kinds of foods involved (hot), with whom such events take place, and where. In the survey, respondents were asked whether the reason for their most recent eating out occasion was for (1) A special occasion (SpOc); (2) Just a social occasion (JSO); (3) Convenience/quick meal (C/Q); (4) Business meeting/meal; or (5) Other (specify). Figure 1 shows that between 1995 and 2015; the proportion of last meals in restaurants that were described as special occasions has fallen, the proportion described as ‘convenience/quick’ has increased, while the proportion which are ‘just social occasions’ and ‘business’ remains largely unchanged. The shift in restaurant meals has been primarily from special occasions to convenience/quick events.

Looking to the qualitative data, we similarly find an informalisation and simplification narrative across the data, and in all three cities. To explore the meaning of more informal and more regular dining, we looked to the range of dining events described by interviewees and distinguished the special from what appeared to be quotidian or what we call ‘ordinary’ eating out events. While special meals should be “memorable events”, most of those described by interviewees are less exceptional. These ‘ordinary’ meals are shaped and inspired by myriad related practices and are unremarkable and un-exceptional; fewer are planned in advance, they are tied to everyday activities and they are related to everyday responsibilities like ‘feeding work’ (DeVault, 1991). They are more informal and also more affordable, but nevertheless central to repertoires of eating and sociability.

We further characterise these ‘ordinary’ events into the ‘impromptu’ and the ‘regularised’. Most interviewees perform a variation of this practice to different degrees, and at different times, according to the social circumstances, and ties to other practice conditions. Releasing oneself from the labour of preparing food as well as other domestic obligations and chores, enters the impromptu event:

*‘I can’t be bothered, so let’s go out. It’s just easier.’ - Nicola, Bristol.*

Lara (London), who suffers with an on-going illness, does not always feel well enough to cook, so takes her family out to a ‘carvery’ restaurant in its place. This, she claims is her way of making ‘*sure that the family gets together’*. Eating out offers an alternative means of accomplishing ‘feeding work’ (DeVault, 1991; Sullivan, 1997).

Not all ‘ordinary’ meals out can be characterised as impromptu. Accounts are sprinkled with references to appointments made with others. What we call regularised meals take place at intervals by agreement with kith and kin outside the household, and meals out together are a regular means through which to stay in touch with each other. Often, these are patterns of sociability described as having emerged over time.

*‘there’s four of us usually go out together […] friends of ours, we usually go out with them once a month or something like that, different restaurants’. - Gerald, Preston*.

These occasions are particularly important for women:

*‘by the time you’ve done everything and everything is ready, by the time you get to it you don’t want it’. - Enid, Preston.*

*‘we’ve got lots of exciting things to try, unfortunately it doesn’t always appeal to him, so I don’t get to try them, but I try them with my Thursday Girls’. - Miranda, Bristol.*

As we argue elsewhere (Paddock et al. 2017), these are opportunities to spend time comfortably with each other without the routine domestic chores encroaching on their leisure time (Sullivan 1997), where their tastes can be indulged without catering to the tastes of their families (Charles and Kerr, 1988) and where the social world of their table cannot be so easily interrupted by anyone other than waiting staff. We suggest therefore, that over twenty years the meaning of the practice of eating out has evolved. It has become more ordinary as impromptu and regularised social meals provide alternative templates. The normalisation of eating out alters understandings and enables new opportunities for sociability.

Arriving at such interpretations is the result of dialogic analysis of two datasets, in tandem. Triangulating our data sources and analysis in this way, is, however, more than a means of simply corroborating results by making the same observations in different settings. Rather, Brannen (2005) suggests four possibilities generated by triangulation that go beyond corroboration. These are named: ‘elaboration/expansion’; ‘initiation’; ‘complementarity’; and ‘contradiction’. Our revisit elaborates and expands upon both qualitative and quantitative data through gnomic analysis, but as we move through analysis asking different questions of the data, to address different debates pertaining to eating out, we initiate inquiry with one dataset, before complementing initial insights derived from the examination of the first. We are yet to encounter serious conflicts between both data sets, but find productive tensions between them, for example, in the interpretation of changing meanings against modest changes in frequency observed using the survey instrument.

To illustrate further the messy dialogic process of analysing data collected via a mixed method research strategy, we explain how we came to understand dynamics of taste for various types and styles of cuisine in relation to a shifting landscape of ethnic diversity.

*Taste: Ethnicity and cuisine type/style*

Net migration figures suggest increased ethnic diversity of the British population over the last 20 years (ONS, 2016), seeing a commensurate scholarly interest in understanding the effects of cosmopolitanism (Prieur and Savage, 2013), upon many areas of socio-cultural life in Britain, such as musical taste, dress, food consumption, social integration, and so on. Given the renewed affordances of the data in 2015, we join this cause by exploring taste and eating out in 2015, seeking to understand with greater detail the relationship between taste and ethnicity.

In both 1995 and 2015, respondent’s ethnicity was identified by asking, ‘To which of these (ethnic) groups do you consider you belong’? In line with official classificatory practices (ONS) in 1995, 9 response alternatives were offered while in 2015 19 response alternatives were offered (Table 1). Both *additional* response items (e.g. options to identify as multiple/mixed ethnicities) and *disaggregated* response alternatives (e.g. identifying national /regional origin within the identification as ‘white’) were offered in 2015 compared with 1995.

<Insert Table 1.1 here>

*Table 1.1 Ethnic identification response alternative in 1995 (left) and 2015(right)*

Both the greater detail captured in 2015 - achieved through the inclusion of additional categories and the disaggregation of existing categories - and the greater proportion of respondents who identify as a group other than white British, unlocks the potential to explore eating out and ethnicity. Indeed, this is in part a response to critique that the conflation of ethnic differences into categories of white/non-white, addresses issues of taste only ever from the point of view of the white majority (Ray, 2016).

With reference to cuisine style, in 2015 – as in 1995 - we asked: ‘during the last 12 months, in which of the restaurant types and places listed on this card have you eaten on the premises’? In 1995, Chinese and Thai were aggregated and offered as a single response alternative. Japanese and French cuisine were not offered as response categories in 2015. Traditional British and Modern British were newly offered responses in 2015.

< Insert Table 1.2 here>

*Table 1.2 Cuisine Styles experienced in the last 12 months in 1995 (left) and 2015 (right)*

The expansion of response alternatives has enabled the substantive exploration of ethnicity and cuisine styles. However, due to limitations of the data in 1995, it is not possible to conduct quantitative analysis using our survey data that expounds changes in taste of non-white British groups over the 20 year period between 1995 and 2015. Instead, we contextualise our findings in 2015 within other research concerned with the changing landscape of taste, the increased diversity of the population, and the relationship between them.

As reported in Warde, et al. (2019) the data suggest that a significant proportion of the sample are conversant with a wide range of different culinary styles, a feature which must impact upon the overall tastes and diets of contemporary Britons. As a point of comparison, 48 per cent of respondents reported in 1995 that they had not eaten in an ‘ethnic’ restaurant of any kind in the last twelve months, but by 2015 that proportion had fallen to 22 per cent.[[3]](#endnote-3) In 1995, the propensity to visit restaurants defined by their selling of ‘ethnic’ cuisine was a strong indicator of social position; people with high levels of cultural and economic capital were much more likely during the previous year to have visited several different types of ‘ethnic’ restaurant than those with less education and working class occupations (Warde and Martens, 2000, p.81ff). It was argued that having a broad familiarity with ‘ethnic’ cuisines was evidence of culinary curiosity and adventurousness and, a mark of distinction. The data thus confirms a meaningful association between taste and social position (see Warde et al., forthcoming), for which we depend upon expanded categorisations of variables such as ethnicity and class trajectory.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has explored the opportunities and challenges of revisiting the study ‘eating out’, conducted by Warde and Martens in 1995. We have emphasised that the triangulation of two datasets has allowed us to initiate analysis from multiple points of entry, to expand upon lines of inquiry, to elaborate, to sense-check hunches and interpretations both expected and surprising – e.g. the relative stability of frequency of eating out reported in the survey. Indeed, the confidence with which we speak about the data comes from its mixed methods approach, and from the assurance we take from not having only revisited claims made from the 1995 data, but from the harmonisation of both survey datasets. Such reanalysis triples the work, but also increases the strength of claims made.

Nevertheless, the confidence with which we interpret the data must be met with some reflection. Having taken inspiration from Burawoy’s (2003) focused revisit, we promised to consider internal and external explanations for the changes and continuities we observe between these two points in time. Burawoy (2003) proposes that the changes and continuities noted between earlier accounts and a later revisit, can be credited with differences in ‘1) the relation of observer to participant, 2) theory brought to the field by the ethnographer, 3) internal processes within the field itself, or 4) forces external to the field site’ (p.645).

Because we researchers eat out regularly, our own experience probably influences our understanding. However, the observations we make, and our subsequent interpretations are grounded in conversation with practitioners of eating out other than ourselves, and which are observable in the patterning of responses to variables pertaining to eating practices in 1,101 cases. Moreover, we note that we have focused upon eating events across three cities, we speak to the relationship between place, modes of provision, and practice. We bring theories to bear upon this data that extend, and in Burawoy’s terms, reconstruct the 1995 study in order to empirically observe change and continuity over a twenty-year period. Thus, our motivations, and the dilemmas of reflexivity we face, pertain to the realist and constructivist kinds. Crucially, Warde and Martens (2000) documented for the first time the relationship between eating at home, eating at restaurants, and eating at the homes of others, which contributes to a body of work that frames eating as a practice (Warde, 2017). We continue to elucidate the patterns and meanings shaping eating out as a practice, and not as a series of individual behaviours. We find that one core dynamic at play is that of normalisation of eating out (see Paddock, et al., 2017).

Turning to dilemmas of a realist kind, we can account for potential variation internal to the practice of eating. The financial crisis of 2008 - recovery from which saw the implementation of the government’s austerity programme – brought consequences felt by hoouseholds whose budgets have been squeezed by the shrinking of incomes in real terms. This may account for the relatively small increase in the frequency of eating out since 1995, while market responses to austerity have been widely noted to have been guided by the desire to shape more casual and in many cases more affordable ways to prop up the sector during difficult times.

These principles of reflexivity highlight the ways in which we are mindful of the various reasons for change and continuity in the practice of eating that we seek to explain. Indeed, we open-up the research process to scrutiny (Glucksmann, 2000), by speaking both to procedural issues in the analysis, as well as logics guiding ongoing interpretations.

1. Overall how often have you eaten out in a restaurant, pub, café or similar establishment during the last 12 months, excluding times when you were away on holiday (in the UK or abroad)? [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. When did this occasion take place? [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Warde and Martens, 2000: p.83. The proportion of the sample who had visited an Indian restaurant increased from 33 to 44 per cent, for Chinese and/or Thai the increase was from 29 to 42, and for Italian 31 to 52.

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   [↑](#endnote-ref-3)