



THE TROUBLE WITH SWEET BUNS

We talk to **Dr. Zofia Boni** from the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań about childhood, food and family lives.

ACADEMIA: The title of your research project mentions sweet buns. Why is that?

ZOFIA BONI: The title is intended to attract attention. Sweet buns have featured heavily in recent media debates and discussions. What children should and should not eat in schools has been debated by various state institutions and non-governmental organizations. In this debate, which focuses on children's health and wellbeing, there is a powerful tendency to judge and moralize. *Drożdżówki* (sweet buns) have

become a symbol representing a conflict between different social groups.

Does the consumption of sweets by children and teenagers constitute a social problem?

Many people perceive it as a social problem. But I am mainly interested in studying why it is perceived in this way and how it emerged as a social problem. And, more generally, what the intensified debates about sweets and children's food tell us about broader social

DR. ZOFIA BONI

processes happening in Poland. This brought me to study childhood obesity.

Is it a major problem in Poland?

It is, according to doctors, dieticians and nutritionists, but childhood obesity is also widespread in the US, UK and many countries in Asia and Africa. Poland is certainly not unique in this respect.

Where do we rank on the list?

When the WHO presented the results of its research in 2012, it revealed that the numbers of overweight and obese children in Poland were growing at the fastest rate in Europe. However, the follow-up study by Poland's Food and Nutrition Institute showed that the trend was slowing down. I approach the situation from the perspective of anthropology and sociology, so I am not concerned with resolving this "public health issue." I am interested in who presents childhood obesity as a problem, how and why they do so. My project examines obesity as an experience – what it is like to be a fat child in Poland. I investigate childhood obesity in Poland not from a medical perspective, but through the experiences of overweight children, their parents and specialists who work with families – psychologists, dietitians, nutritionists and healthcare professionals. My aim is to change the perspective, to look at the social dynamics of childhood obesity, without denying that we may be dealing with a medical problem.

So what have you found so far?

My research is ongoing, so it is too early to draw any conclusions. But I can tell you about my earlier, related research.

During my doctoral research I studied the ways of feeding children and children's eating practices. My focus has been on children aged between six and twelve years old, and the negotiations involved with feeding and eating. I showed that feeding relations are entangled with power relationships between children and their parents when it comes to food, which plays out in discussions at the table as to what needs to be eaten and so on. I discovered that grandparents are very important actors in those negotiations.

What kinds of families did you work with?

A practical reality of ethnographic research is that I can only study people who want to talk to me. The majority of the families I worked with were middle-class and all lived in or near Warsaw. They were all people who take an interest in what their children eat. It so happened that none of the children had any diet-related disorders; none were malnourished or obese. I also conducted ethnographic research in primary schools in Warsaw, by studying school canteens and tuck shops. I studied the food industry, the state

as a highly diversified social actors and non-governmental institutions.

I approached the subject from the perspective of relationships and negotiations. Parents are told they are supposed to feed their children a certain way, the state has a different approach, while schools do something else entirely. Everyone has some ideas about proper feeding, but things look different in practice. There is also a widespread belief that children are simply passive participants in this process.

What did your research show?

Children are highly active participants of social life. They have a different position than adults, but they have just as much influence on what happens to them and around them as adults do. This also applies to what they eat.

Your article includes the quote, "My mum feeds me, but I eat whatever I want!"

That's right – children certainly have some autonomy in the process of feeding them. They can refuse to eat, throw food on the floor, sneak away from the table, burst into tears, demand something else. Children use many different tactics, as parents know from their own experience. Anyone who has been tasked with feeding young children is familiar with making concessions such as "just three more spoons of this," "two more bites of that," "you can leave the potatoes but finish your meat and vegetables." My starting point is that feeding children is rooted in relationships, and we should think about how these relationships are shaped. And we shouldn't take a moralizing approach, such as assuming certain foods are unhealthy or bad or that we must change the way kids think. Instead, let's respect what children say and think, and consider their opinions, because it will help us understand their attitudes to food.

How do parents approach food?

In a number of different ways. There are certainly families which do not pay a great deal of attention to food, but for the families I have worked with it has been important, which I think is the most common approach in a place like Warsaw.

Does it become a kind of an obsession?

Sometimes, perhaps, but in my families it was more about anxieties and tensions. Parents – especially mothers, because in Poland it is still mainly mothers who are in charge of feeding children – are highly aware of the importance of "proper food" and find it a major challenge, not least because they are bombarded with messages about "proper" or healthy eat-

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ing. And of course the concept of healthy food isn't at all straightforward and can mean many things. This automatically means that if mothers don't ensure their kids eat well, they are seen as bad mothers. This was especially striking during the discussions about *drożdżówki* (sweet buns). Although the conversation centered around food at schools, it quickly expanded to parents who are perceived not to be feeding their children properly. I believe that the constant bombardment by the media, public institutions and other sources with information about what children should and shouldn't eat, implying that there is only one right way and anything else is simply wrong, this strong tendency to judge and moralize, is not right and certainly is not helpful.

What other mechanisms play a role?

Many of the issues to do with eating at home are really attempts to control children. Mothers are told that it is expected of them to strictly regulate what their sons and daughters eat on the way to and from school, at their friends' or grandparents'. In my research I relate to the theories of Michel de Certeau, stating that various hegemonic power institutions – including parents – use a range of strategies to introduce a certain social order. Mums and dads come up with rules such as sweets being allowed only at weekends or one given weekday; then there are internalized concepts such as that families should only eat food in the form of meals: breakfast, lunch and dinner, perhaps an afternoon snack. But children have their own tactics to avoid such rules and slip out from under the influence of adults who try to impose rigid structures; they try to shift the power balance. And they frequently try to manipulate their parents, using arguments like “But dad said I could leave the rest!” etc.

Why are family meals becoming a problem?

Because they are tied with great expectations and family meals have become a symbol of family lives and those expectations placed on families. In Poland, many parents recall their own childhoods when they were not allowed to get up from the table, either at home or at school, until they had finished their dinner, which could stretch into many hours. It's hardly a surprise they vow not to repeat this with their own children. In combination with our society becoming child-centered, placing the youngest generation as the focal point of the family, this means that the current way of thinking no longer allows for children to be forced to stay at the table until they finish what's on their plate. In a way some children have it a lot easier now – they have more flexibility and freedom to refuse

certain foods, because their relationships with their parents are structured differently. Families are predominantly about providing space for love and care. This doesn't change the fact that family meals and issues surrounding what children eat remain something of a battlefield.

According to a certain narrative in Poland, the fact that families supposedly no longer eat meals together means the collapse of society as we know it. I would be cautious with such statements. Unfortunately such narratives are catchy, because they appoint blame.

How do mums withstand the constant offensive from politicians, from advertising...

...and from other mums? I think they should trust themselves. They should not have to surrender to the pressure according to which everything must be super healthy, and find a balance between allowing their children what is called junk food – frequently perceived as the epitome of unhealthy and bad food – and obsessing about controlling what children eat at all times.

It isn't easy, because when public debates focus on children's food – and obesity – the finger is always pointed at parents as those who should be blamed. In practice this means that it's mothers who bear the entire burden, and they feel they have to strive for perfection. We are increasingly discussing the unpaid work carried out by women, and this is especially relevant to issues relating to food and what children eat. And there should be more support available to parents, rather than judgement.

What format should this support take?

There is a range of solutions being introduced on regional and national levels. They range from food education, which in Poland takes the shape of nutrition education, to introducing a tax on unhealthy or junk food, as well as improving access to information and healthy food. And we must not forget the role played by care institutions and schools.

Coming back to obesity, if a mother discovers that her child is obese, she needs to know what institutions or organizations she can approach for help. Currently parents need to pay for private appointments with dieticians or psychologists, and that's simply not financially viable for many families.

So what does your research into sweet buns reveal?

It shows the complex web of relationships and social dynamics related to children and food in Poland, with children certainly playing an important role. It also reveals that the food practices and experiences are an important part of social changes in Poland. And most of all, it shows that food is always a political issue.

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