



Original Article

Men, masculinity and food: interviews with Finnish carpenters and engineers

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This study explores how Finnish men from two occupational groups describe food in their everyday life. The concept of masculinities is used in interpreting men's food-related behaviours and beliefs. Data are drawn from semi-structured interviews in the 1990s with twenty carpenters and twenty engineers involved in the building trade. The paper presents analyses of the similarities and differences in how the men talked about meat; vegetables; beer and wine as parts of meals; food as energy, health and pleasure; and cooking. The results show variation both between and within occupational groups. The men did not stress the role of meat, but rather emphasised the role of vegetables. The carpenters tended to favour meat whereas the engineers had a more positive attitude to vegetables. Eating was described as an everyday routine needed to refuel the body and stay healthy. In addition, the engineers talked about the pleasures of eating. The men described cooking as optional or exceptional. The carpenters seemed to more actively embrace hegemonic masculinity and reject what is feminine than the engineers, who have reformulated their definition of masculinity to encompass concerns with health. This study suggests that both masculinity and occupational class play a role in male food-related practices and preferences.

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Introduction

Differences between health and health behaviours of men and women are well documented in western countries, but this is an area that still needs more clarification. It is recognised that the question of gender and health is a complex one and various explanations, including biological, structural, behavioural and cultural, have been offered (Watson, 2000). In Finland, the higher mortality among men has to a large part been attributed to smoking and alcohol consumption (Martelin & Valkonen, 1996; Mäkelä, 1997). In addition, gender differences in diet have been reported (Roos *et al.*, 1996). Dietary surveys show that Finnish men have a larger energy intake, consume more meat, potatoes and alcohol, but less vegetables, fruits, fish, chicken, cheese and sweets than women (National Public Health Institute, 1998; Roos, 1998). Although only part of the differences between men's and women's diets can be

explained by variation in physiological needs, other explanations have rarely been discussed in dietary studies. However, there is a relationship between behaviour and meaning; what people tend to eat is linked to social norms and cultural beliefs.

Sociological and anthropological studies of food have argued that food and food practices establish and reflect male and female identity and relationships (Murcott, 1982; Charles & Kerr, 1988; DeVault, 1991; Beardsworth & Keil, 1997; Caplan, 1997; Counihan, 1999; Jensen & Holm, 1999). Food itself is coded as feminine because purchasing, preparation and presentation of food is in many senses regarded as essentially women's work. All foods are not equal; some foods have special status and some are labelled masculine or feminine food. According to a recent review of the sociological literature on gender and food (Jensen & Holm, 1999), consumption of meat and alcohol products appears to function as an important marker of masculinity in various cultures, whereas consumption of vegetables, fruits and sweet foods symbolises femininity. It has been argued that men tend to prefer higher status

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foods such as red meat, whereas vegetables, which are low on the hierarchy, are undesirable and considered women's food (Barthes, 1975; Twigg, 1984). Drinking beer and becoming drunk among males reflects an attempt to behave in accordance with gender expectations. Masculinity has also been said to involve not caring too much about food, fuelling the body and eating food that others have cooked. In Britain, Anne Murcott (1982) was among the first to link food to power relationships within the family; the husband should be served a "proper meal" prepared by the housewife when he comes home from work.

Men's preference for meat has been demonstrated in several studies in Western cultures (Charles & Kerr, 1986; Bourdieu, 1989; Fiddes, 1991; Adams, 1994; Jensen & Holm, 1999; Holm & Møhl, 2000). For example, Charles and Kerr (1986) found in their study of British families in the 1980s that their female respondents often said that men needed more food than women, and especially more red meat. It has long been believed that meat eating is associated with aggressiveness and violent personality. Killing, butchering and eating of animals is coded with attributes of power and aggression, and meat has connotations of virility, strength and passion. These qualities are also coded as masculine; it is masculine to be strong and the ideal male body is understood as powerful, big, strong and muscular (Fiddes, 1991; Adams, 1994; Lupton, 1996). Pierre Bourdieu's (1989) study of distinction in French culture in the 1960s noted that the working classes emphasise the importance of a strong male body and tend to develop an instrumental, functional relation to the body. For them food should build and fuel their bodies. Bourdieu suggests that for members of the French working classes fish is seen as inappropriate for men because it is light and has to be eaten in a way which contradicts the masculine way of eating. As Susan Bordo (1993:108) states: "Men are supposed to have hearty, even voracious, appetites. It is a mark of the manly to eat spontaneously and expansively . . ."

The food- and health-related attitudes and behaviours men adopt vary. In health studies socio-economic inequalities have been documented (Koskinen, 1997). Men in professional occupations, and those who have passed through higher education live longer than working class males. One of the main reasons given is that members of the former group smoke less and have less hazardous drinking habits, which is similar to the explanation that has been given for gender differences. Concern with fitness is reported as being strongly correlated with the middle and upper social classes. We also know that men belonging to the lower social classes have less healthy food habits: they consume fewer vegetables and fruits and more butter and high-fat milk

(Prättälä *et al.*, 1992; Roos *et al.*, 1996). Social groups may differentiate themselves by behaving according to their own conceptions of what is suitable and appropriate (Bourdieu, 1989). Working class men have been said to compensate for their subordinate status (Pyke, 1996) by resisting any attempt to make their food lighter as a way of expressing a kind of symbolic protest or resistance against mainstream life (Karisto *et al.*, 1993), which today seems to be characterised by concern about health and attempts to control weight.

In critical gender studies the variation among men is evident in talking about masculinities and their relations instead of masculinity (Connell, 1995). The emergence of critical studies of men and masculinity is a fairly recent research area, and because of its interdisciplinary nature the focus in theories of masculinity have varied. Theories of masculinity allow examination of men's relationships to food without comparing men with women. Social constructionist theorising around masculinities (Connell, 1995; Moynihan, 1998; Courtenay, 2000) can help illustrate variations in food-related behaviours and beliefs among men. From a constructionist perspective behaviours and beliefs can be understood as means of producing and reproducing gender. Gender is something one does in social interactions rather than a set of essential qualities inherent in women and men (Moynihan, 1998). Men and women are assumed to think and act in the ways they do because of ideals of masculinity and femininity that they adopt from their culture, and men/women are active agents in constructing and reconstructing norms of masculinity/femininity. Different masculinities are likely to be produced in different groups of men and these masculinities are constantly being redefined and renegotiated depending on the context (Connell, 1995).

Hierarchies of social class are reflected in masculinities. The concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995) describes the culturally dominant form of masculinity at a given place and time. Although there is a hegemonic standard or stereotype of masculinity (for example, being strong), in reality there are several types of masculinities. Men have different options. They can try to live up to the hegemonic standard, reformulate the definition of masculinity or reject the hegemonic form of masculinity. Males doing manual labour tend to display exaggerated masculinity through physical endurance and tolerance of discomfort to compensate for their subordinate status (Pyke, 1996).

This overview shows, firstly, that information on men, social class and food can be found in the literature, but as Jensen and Holm (1999) have recognised, studies focusing on men's ideas, viewpoints and accounts are rare. Views on men have often been reported at second hand by women. Secondly, earlier studies have explored

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