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Eat Well or Die: Nutrition Discourse and the American Grocery Shopper

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Jamie Oliver is an internationally known chef and anti-obesity crusader. In a recent TEDtalk presentation (Technology, Entertainment, Design), Oliver argues that one of the culprits in our dysfunctional food system is the household. In one shot he looks directly at a young mother with her household's weekly food choices piled on the table: pizza, corn dogs, cheesy casseroles, soda. Jamie Oliver peers at the table and then at this mother and says:

> "I need you to know this is going to kill your children early. How does this make you feel?"
> The mother tearfully replies "I'm feeling sad and depressed. I want my kids to succeed in life… but I'm killing them."
> Oliver's response: "Yes you are. But we can stop that (TED Conferences, 2010)."

How does Oliver propose to stop this woman from killing her children? First, he would put a food ambassador in every store to teach her how to shop and how to cook convenient, healthy meals. Manufacturers and retailers would reform product labeling so she would have more information about her food choices. Big industry would put food education at the heart of their practice. Most importantly, she would teach her kids about food by cooking more at home, thereby helping them learn where their food comes from as well as life-long cooking skills.

To his credit, Oliver brings attention to the quality of food we provide our children in schools and the necessity of making significant changes for our children's health through his "Food Revolution" series on American television. Although Oliver stresses local food, fruits and vegetables as the foundation of fighting obesity and healthy eating, the vehicle for making change is still individuals gaining more information on what and how to eat. This emphasis on individuals making better choices through education, especially in households, is problematic on many levels. Foundationally, a focus on education is a variant of the rational choice model that assumes a socially isolated actor who makes decisions in his own best interest. We know, however, from excellent ethnographic research that grocery shopping is as much about producing and reproducing relationships and family as it is about satisfying individual desires (DeVault 1991; Miller 1998). Instead of using an individual calculus to maximize utility, shoppers interweave knowledge and practice to provision the household as well as negotiate identity, the meaning of family, and what constitutes food through the practice of shopping (Phillips 2008; Cook 2009).

Another assumption underpinning the consumer education model is that more or somehow more accurate information will allow individuals to make better choices. It is not clear, however, that information alone has made Americans any healthier. Food fads like the Adkins diet or South Beach come and go, often

leaving people with more pounds at the end rather than less. Jessica Mudry (2009) convincingly argues that our national policy of quantifying food has not made us healthier and in the process has ignored other important properties that may provide a better basis for food choices such as taste, culture, or tradition. A national food policy that reduces food to scientific properties turns a delicious glass of cold milk into a food product that has 150 calories, 8 grams of protein and 5 grams of fat and in the process ignores other important social properties of food (Mudry 2009). Michael Pollan (2008) calls this process 'nutritionism' which in effect may have destroyed other bases for food choices and at the least has made choosing food more confusing. Thus, information in itself is not necessarily a healthy choice.

In my own study on grocery shopping (Koch, 2009) I found that information has not necessarily made it easier to feed families and in fact often adds more anxiety to the shopping trip. Many of the shoppers I interviewed were aware of the food pyramid and articulated their knowledge of fats, calories and other scientific information, but expressed concerns about the consequences of making food choices based on this information. One mother understood that vegetables were important but faced this dilemma:

> "Should you put the fattening Ranch on it to get kids to eat the vitamins? I don't know what the answer is. I guess I know what we are doing to get the vitamins from the broccoli and at least cultivate some getting it down them versus no vegetable at all. [We] use a lighter ranch with reduced fat and again I don't know what the long term consequences of those things are."

Another mother knew what her family "should" be eating but did not necessarily trust this information:

> We probably should be reading labels, I think we'd all be healthier for it. But I figure if you need sour cream you need sour cream. Why pay a dollar more for something that says "fat free' and then you find out that the fat free thing gives you cancer anyway. Just give me the fat and we'll call it good.

A consumer education model also ignores the larger social context of food shopping for households. Although we hear more about fathers participating in household activities, according to the American Time Use Survey food provisioning and preparation are still highly gendered activities. On an average day, 20 percent of women are grocery shopping and 75 percent of women are preparing food and cleaning up for the household, while roughly 10 percent of men are shopping and 40 percent are preparing food and cleaning up (USDA 2005). And this only includes shopping at the store: it does not include all the emotional and administrative labor of planning meals, making lists, juggling competing needs and likes, and even unloading the food from the car after a trip. This food work is in addition to waged labor: nearly three-fourths of women with children under the age of eighteen are in the workplace (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2009). Thus, feeding the household is still part of women's second shift.

Food choices are also constrained by access. Food deserts, areas in which there are no grocery stores within 10 miles, are often found in rural or inner city neighborhoods and reduce the efficacy of nutrition information: one can't choose fruit or vegetables that aren't available. Another example of an access issue is organic or natural foods. When the price is prohibitive, or the store is in the suburbs, choice is severely limited.

While assuming a socially isolated, gender-neutral individual, a consumer education model also makes the individual alone responsible for her choice. Having more information would do little to relieve mothers of their shopping duties and may intensify their responsibility to "know" what is good to eat. Joan Acker (2006) argues that corporations and governments through the profit motive have absolved themselves for carework, of which feeding kids is a major part, and this absolution is an integral part of the contemporary capitalist economy. A consumer education model hides the choices made in corporations and government agencies for the production and distribution of food products like the frozen corn dogs on the mother's table and makes her work of grocery shopping more difficult. In essence, more information and education serve to make consumers and especially mothers easy targets when their kids are not healthy.

The emphasis on education doesn't change the social context in which shoppers perform their work, nor does it necessarily give consumers more power vis-a-vis the large corporate interests that produce food. Individuals, of course, make the final decision about what gets put in their mouths or the mouths of their

children. Oliver's solution brings up a long-standing debate: how much power do individuals as consumers truly have in the food system? To blame mothers for killing their children through what they purchase and cook seems an unlikely strategy for changing a multi-billion dollar industry and certainly does little to provide relief from the second shift of consumption labor. When I asked shoppers what they would change about grocery shopping, two answers were given. Half the shoppers wanted someone else to do the work, while the other half wanted more time to devote to the work. None expressed an interest in more information.

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>>> *back to* Consumers, Commodities & Consumption, Vol. 11(2) May 2010.