Company and meal choices considered by Nordic adolescents

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Abstract

This article examines the meal choices considered by Nordic adolescents in two social situations: for themselves and for the family. In addition, the frequency of family meals is compared between the countries studied. The survey data ($n = 1539$) were collected during 2006–2007 from 9th grade students (aged 14–17 years) in Finland, Sweden, Denmark and Norway. Analysis was based on both quantitative variables and open-ended data. Family meals were found to be less common among Finnish respondents than in the remaining data. In all countries but Denmark, the number of parents in the family had an effect on the frequency of family meals. Meals echoing or fully meeting the structural definition of a 'proper meal' were most common when describing meals for the family. The difference between the two social situations was most apparent for those who mentioned 'Fast food dishes' for themselves. Gender differences in open-ended questions were smallest in Denmark and most apparent in Norway. Future studies should focus not only on how many of adolescents eat in what is termed an unhealthy way but also on how they themselves perceive and conceptualize eating, and what kinds of justifications they give to their everyday choices in different social contexts.

Introduction

Studies of adolescents and family meals are abundant and include viewpoints such as socialization and cultural learning (Tulviste *et al.*, 2002; Fiese *et al.*, 2006; Ochs and Merav, 2006), and influences on dietary intake (Haapalahti *et al.*, 2003; Neumark-Sztainer, 2006; Woodruff and Hanning, 2008). The number of such studies demonstrates that shared family meals are generally thought of as important from the standpoint of children's and young people's relationship to food as well as the development of their eating patterns. However, the concept of influence between parents and their children can hardly be seen as one-way or straightforward (Eldridge and Murcott, 2000; Gram, 2010). In fact, in recent years, a growing number of studies have emphasized the active role of adolescents in producing culture and society, and in using food and drink as a tool of self-expression (Autio, 2004; Bahr Bugge, 2010; Bergström *et al.*, 2010; Curtis *et al.*, 2011; Persson-Osowski *et al.*, 2011). These studies draw upon various fields of research (e.g. childhood and youth studies) and theoretical concepts (e.g. identity and agency), but what they have in common is the aim of producing a more nuanced understanding of how young people relate to and reason about food.

The present article examines what Nordic¹ adolescents consider to be appropriate meal choices made in two different social situations: eating alone and eating with the family. Because the way in which meals are constructed and the understanding of what constitutes a meal in the first place are deeply embedded in culture (Johansson *et al.*, 2009), adolescents' responses can be seen as reactions to broader food-cultural codes and values. On the other hand, they can also be seen as reflections of personal preferences or simply the limitations of a given setting. From a pedagogic point of view, it is important to understand the way in which adolescents themselves delineate and react to food-related issues. This can help us develop food education approaches that are both relevant and interesting for young people (Caraher *et al.*, 2004).

In the following sections, the juxtaposition of family meals vs. solitary meals is briefly outlined from a Nordic perspective. In addition, previous studies of adolescents' meal choices in the family context are deliberated. This constitutes the background against which results will be examined.

¹The Nordic countries comprise Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Iceland. However, because of the lack of data from Iceland, this article will focus on the first four named countries. Accordingly, the term 'Nordic' will hence be used here to refer to Finland, Sweden, Denmark and Norway.

A family meal in the Nordic context

Meals are a typical way of illustrating eating in the Nordic context, and they are often seen as the cornerstones of family life (Holm, 2001; Mäkelä, 2009). Concern about the disappearance or structural breakdown of meals is connected to current discussion about family meals; it is feared that individualization, reduction of shared meals at home and eating out becoming more common will turn eating into an isolated and mechanical activity. The concept of family meals, however, is highly ambiguous, and it has proved to be challenging to identify whether this dissipation is actually taking place. Some researchers have even questioned the historical evidence of the existence of so-called ideal family meals (Murcott, 1994), claiming that the fear of their disappearance is based on an unjustifiable yearning to a situation that might never have prevailed. Nonetheless, there is evidence of the existence of family meals in Nordic societies today.

According to a review of the family meal in Europe (Fjellström, 2009), sharing meals is a common phenomenon among European families at the beginning of the 21st century, especially among those with younger children. A comparative Nordic study (Holm, 2001) found that family meals were more common in Danish and Norwegian families than in Finnish and Swedish ones. The researchers defined a family meal as one eaten at the home of a family with several members, eaten in the company of other family members and eaten by all household members at the same time. The study showed that households eating a lot of family meals did not necessarily eat more so-called proper meals, which were defined as containing a centre, a staple or/and bread and vegetables with trimmings as an additional option (Mäkelä, 2001). It is notable that the properness of meals according to this definition did not focus on the nutritional aspects of eating.

The ambiguity of family meals has also become apparent in studies with a more qualitative approach. As Brembeck (2005) has stated, even family meals eaten in McDonald's restaurants can be considered 'proper' for some families. This indicates in a very concrete way that a shared meal can be experienced by a group of people as right, important or proper even if it does not meet high standards in terms of health or nutrition. Furthermore, as Fjellström (2009) brings out, it is important to remember that connotations of the family meal and the main meal of the day are not necessarily the same, nor do family meals invariably have to take place around the same table or even in the same room. In the realities of everyday life, family meals are often compromises between cultural expectations and the preferences of family members (Palojoki, 1997; Anvig, 2012).

Adolescent meal choices in the family context

Nordic adolescents and meal choices in the family context have previously been studied in terms of the influence of children on family meal decisions and the family's consumption process (Pettersson *et al.*, 2004; Thorstedt and Sallerberg, 2006; Norgaard *et al.*, 2007; Olsen and Ruiz, 2008; Gram, 2010). These studies demonstrate that children play a role in the food-choice process within the family context, a role that tends to intensify along with age. The level of skills influences the process of children's food choice in the home context (Holsten *et al.*, 2012), as well as their healthy and versatile eating in general (Räihä *et al.*, 2006).

Food and drink can also be seen as symbols of self-expression among young people, and they can be important symbols of social and cultural belonging (Bahr Bugge, 2010). According to a Finnish study (Prättälä, 1989), adolescents can simultaneously be a part of both traditional cultures linked to home and school, as well as more modern patterns of engagement with friends and the media. In this way, adolescents' food choices can flexibly adapt depending on the context. A Swedish study (Wesslén, 2000) found that adolescents (aged 16–17 years) linked proper food with home cooking, whereas fast food was eaten for pleasure. Boys tended to value easiness, quickness and taste, whereas girls were more likely to think about health issues and nutrition (Wesslén, 2000).

Johansson *et al.* (2009) found that children were aware of common understandings about healthy and unhealthy foods and were used to dealing with food-related contradictions as they adjusted to different social and spatial contexts. An example of a contradictory theme is fast food, a conflicting topic in terms of youth food culture and identity (e.g. Wills *et al.*, 2009; Bahr Bugge, 2011). In the study by Johansson *et al.* (2009), cravings, familiarity, easiness, quickness and situational limitations were emphasized as reasons for food choices.

Present study

This article examines meal choices considered by adolescents with comparisons between Nordic countries forming a framework for the analyses. Eating together with the family was examined in the light of the following demographic variables: number of parents, nationality and gender.² In the analyses of open-ended questions, attention was first directed to the types of meals respondents considered as meals for themselves. Finally, comparisons of open-ended questions were aimed to reveal any differences between meals chosen for oneself and meals chosen for the family.

It should be noted that the article does not examine what kind of food is actually eaten. Rather, adolescents considered meal choices that are seen as representations of how the respondents relate to food in the two previously named situations. A family meal is here defined as a meal chosen for the family, and it is treated as having the connotations of family meals in a wider cultural context. According to this definition, the family meal can be any meal during the day and can also take place outside the physical boundaries of the home. The definition of 'a family' in these data is based on respondents' own interpretations of who they see as being part of their family.

Methods

Research design and participants

The analysis is based on survey data collected as a part of a Nordic research project (2006–2007). The data ($n = 1539$) consisted of

²The questionnaire included only the following background variables: nationality, gender, age and type of family (belonging to a one or two parent family). Therefore, examining the significance of, for instance, the number of siblings was not possible.

responses from 9th grade students (aged 14–17 years³) from four Nordic countries, i.e. Finland ($n = 582$), Sweden ($n = 416$), Denmark ($n = 295$) and Norway ($n = 246$). Questionnaires were completed through a web browser link at school, during a lesson. Further details on the research design and data collection are provided elsewhere (Kainulainen *et al.*, 2012).

Statistical analyses

In the questionnaire, the adolescents were asked to answer on a scale from 1 to 6 (1 = very seldom; 6 = very often) the following question: 'Do you eat with your family'? Independent-samples *t*-tests were conducted to compare mean values of this statement by living in a family with one parent or two parents.

One-way between-group analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to explore the connection of respondents' nationality and eating with the family. *Post hoc* comparison for ANOVA using Dunnett's T3-test was conducted to further examine the nature of differences among countries. Dunnett's T3-test was chosen on the basis of Levene test results (equal variances not assumed) (Tähtinen and Isoaho, 2001). Effect size was estimated according to Cohen's (1988) classification.

Independent-samples *t*-tests were conducted for the data set of each country to compare mean values of eating together with the family by gender.

Because many of the variables were not normally distributed, all results attained through parametric tests were confirmed through corresponding non-parametric tests. All analyses were conducted using SPSS, version 15.0 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA). The chosen level of statistical significance was 5% ($P < 0.05$).

Analysis of open-ended questions

In the questionnaire, adolescents were asked to answer the two following open-ended questions: (1) 'What would you choose if you would buy or prepare a meal for yourself?' and (2) 'What would you choose if you would buy or prepare a meal for your family?' Respondents were allowed to freely write down their answers.

Firstly, inappropriate ($n = 29$) and incomplete answers ($n = 66$) were discarded. Moreover, answers where respondents had misinterpreted the question ($n = 106$)⁴ were left out from further analysis. Because the interest here was specifically on the relationship between choosing a meal for oneself and choosing a meal for the family, answers that were unclear for both questions were not chosen for comparison ($n = 268$). Lack of clarity in this connection means that respondents had given different kinds of qualifications for the food they would choose (e.g. 'I would choose healthy food', 'Food that is easy to prepare'), but had not in any

way specified *what* this food would be. The total number of open-ended responses analysed was 1070 (Finland $n = 440$, Sweden $n = 281$, Denmark $n = 192$, Norway $n = 157$; in total 70% of all respondents).

The analysis of open-ended questions aimed to establish a typology that would describe the data as comprehensively as possible. During the process of carefully reading through the data, fast food dishes were identified as a clear type of response. In addition to the number of such answers, research-based reasons also supported the decision of creating this group of meals: Firstly, fast foods are interesting from a health point of view because they are exceptionally energy-dense and typically have a high quantity of unsaturated fat. Secondly, as stated earlier, fast foods have been identified as a conflicting topic in terms of youth food culture and identity.

Based on the responses, fast foods were defined as including three types of dishes: pizza, hamburger and kebab. Responses stating only the name of the fast food dish or the name of the dish paired with the name of a brand or a restaurant were classified into the fast food category. The data included a few cases in which the respondent had separately mentioned that the fast food dish would be self-prepared or home-made. These responses were left to be classified in the remaining categories. This was based on the notion that the food preparation process changes the meanings attached to a meal (Murcott, 1982; Pipping Ekström and Jonsson, 2009). In addition, owing to the food preparation process, the meal might no longer be fast and easy to acquire. Because there were a low number of these kinds of responses in the data, the delineation does not affect the results of the categorization.

Because the majority of responses would have fallen into the category of different kinds of hot meals, a classification based on the temperature of the dish would not have been illustrative. The structural definition of 'a proper meal' (see Douglas and Nicod, 1974; Murcott, 1982; Mäkelä, 2001, 2009) was found to be useful in clarifying the differences between responses. Nevertheless, a considerable number of responses did not fit the definition of a 'proper meal' either.

The finalized classification included the following four types of meals: 'Fast food dishes', 'Simple dishes and individual parts of a meal', 'Dishes comprising elementary entities' and 'Proper meals and menus'. Responses containing several alternatives were classified according to the dish or meal with the highest resemblance to the definition of a 'proper meal'. This delineation, although harsh in some respects, was essential in order to be able to make comparisons between meals for oneself and meals for the family. In other words, for analytical purposes, the unit of analysis had to be one informant, not the total number of dishes or meals mentioned in the data. Specified typology descriptions and examples from the data for each meal type are presented in Table 1.

At the end of the analysis process, two dimensions were outlined to illuminate the central themes arising from the data and to demonstrate the differences in the nature of the categories. The nature of the four meal types in relation to the two dimensions – 'the level of effort' and 'the level of structural complexity' – is summarized in Figure 1.

Comparisons between the meal choices considered were conducted in Excel according to the established typology (see previous discussion). All answers to the open-ended questions were first coded according to the four meal types. The tendency to change one's response between the two questions is described as a

³The more specific age distribution was as follows: 32% ($n = 487$) of respondents were 14 years old, 42% ($n = 642$) of respondents were 15 years old, 23% ($n = 357$) of respondents were 16 years old and 3% ($n = 54$) of respondents were 17 years old.

⁴Respondents had in these cases classified if they would (a) buy the food or (b) prepare it themselves. However, since the original question in the questionnaire aimed to find out *what* adolescents would choose for themselves or for their family, and because these answers included no such specifications, responses could not be used in the analysis. The number of such answers in the data set of each country is as follows: Finland $n = 5$, Norway $n = 28$, Denmark $n = 31$, Sweden $n = 42$.

Table 1 Typology of responses in the open-ended data

Response type	Description	Examples from the data*
Fast food dishes	a) Responses consisting of fast foods, such as 'pizza', 'hamburger', or 'kebab'. However, if it was separately specified that the pizza, hamburger or kebab was self-made or home-made, the answer was interpreted as a 'Dish comprising an elementary entity' (see description below)	'Pizza', 'Americano pizza', 'a family sized pizza', 'hamburgers', 'a hamburger with fries', 'kebab', 'kebab rolled in bread'
Simple dishes and individual parts of a meal	a) Dishes typically made out of one main ingredient b) Short answers without specifications, typically featuring one specific part of a meal	'Fried eggs', 'quick noodles', 'oat meal porridge', 'ham sandwich' 'vegetables', 'meat', 'pasta', 'salad', 'salmon', 'mashed potatoes'
Dishes comprising elementary entities	(a) Dishes with varied grades of specification constituting a single-course meal (b) Dishes assembled from more than one separately itemized components but NOT featuring all parts of a 'proper meal'	'Soup', 'wok', 'tacos', 'lasagna', 'French fish soup', 'Pork fillet risotto' 'Salmon with lentils', 'chicken sauce and rice', 'spaghetti and a vegetarian sauce'
Proper meals and menus	(a) Responses that included – A main ingredient of meat, fish or a protein-rich vegetarian alternative – Salad or other vegetable trimmings – Bread and/or potatoes, rice, pasta or other corresponding accompaniments, such as couscous – Hot or cold sauce as an additional option (b) Complete meals with several courses	'salad and spaghetti with minced meat sauce', 'wedged potatoes, a sauce with blue cheese and salad', 'salad, cod and potatoes or rice' 'A tasty meat loaf, macaroni – vegetable salad and potatoes, water and milk to drink, and a good fruit salad for dessert'

*Responses including several alternatives were coded according to the example with the highest resemblance to the definition of a 'proper meal'.

Figure 1 Nature of responses in relation to two dimensions: 'the level of effort' and 'the level of structural complexity'.

percentage distribution of answers. The answers are grouped according to the respondent's answer to the question 'a meal for oneself', and change from the answer 'a meal for oneself' to answer 'a meal for family' is presented as cross tabulation.

Answers on the diagonal (bold) have remained unchanged between the two questions. Examples of more detailed answers and selected quotations are presented in the report to provide the reader a deeper understanding of the nuances in the data.

Table 2 Eating with the family by number of parents in the family (scale 1–6; 1 = very seldom, 6 = very often)

Do you eat with your family?	Independent-samples <i>t</i> -test					
	M	SD	<i>t</i>	df	<i>P</i>	η
Finland						
Family with one parent	4.0	1.4	–4.1	580	0.000	0.012
Family with two parents	4.5	1.4				
Sweden						
Family with one parent	4.7	1.4	–2.1	414	0.036	0.003
Family with two parents	5.1	1.2				
Norway						
Family with one parent	4.4	1.5	–3.0	164	0.003	0.006
Family with two parents	5.0	1.3				
Denmark						
Family with one parent	4.9	1.6	–1.6	206	n.s.	
Family with two parents	5.2	1.2				

n.s., not significant.

Results

Eating with the family

In these data, 32% of adolescents reported living in a family with one parent and 68% of respondents reported living in a family with two parents. Table 2 indicates that eating with the family was more common among respondents with two parents in the family in the Finnish, Swedish and Norwegian data. However, according to Cohen's (1988) criteria, the effect sizes indicate a small effect in all cases.

One-way ANOVA showed statistically significant differences between countries on the variable 'Do you eat with your family' [$F(3, 1535) = 26$, $\eta^2 = 0.047$]. Multiple comparisons with Dunnett's T3 (Table 3) confirmed that the lower ranks given by Finnish adolescents differed in a statistically significant way from the ranks given by adolescents in the remaining countries, and that none of the comparisons between Sweden, Norway and Denmark were statistically significant.

No statistically significant differences were found between boys and girls in mean values for the variable 'Do you eat with your family?'.

Choosing a meal for themselves

Table 4 summarizes the types of meals the respondents would have chosen for themselves.

Results indicate that 11–25% of all respondents would have chosen 'Fast food dishes' for themselves. As illustrated in Table 1, responses in this category were typically very short and lacked specifications. Nevertheless, there were also some exceptions where, e.g. the brand of the dish, the fillings of the pizza, the name of the restaurant or the shop and in one case even the phone number of the pizzeria was included in the response.

Table 4 shows that 18–29% of meals for oneself consisted of 'Simple dishes and individual parts of a meal'. In general, responses of this type were also very short. However, the following example provides an exception to that rule through describing explicitly the food preparation process:

I would slice up some pumpkin and eggplant and some small cherry tomatoes, put them in a skewer and cook them in the oven for 30 minutes, and there you have it: healthy food. (A meal for myself, 'Simple dishes and individual parts of a meal', a boy from Denmark)

Also in the data, there were a couple of other answers where the respondents mentioned that they would choose to cook something new and delicious from a cook book, but no other was as detailed as the example above. Nevertheless, the quotation gives a very concrete illustration of the level of effort needed when preparing these types of dishes.

As Table 4 summarizes, 'Dishes comprising elementary entities' was the most common type of meal mentioned in the data, including 42–57% of responses. While straightforward answers, such as 'meat and potatoes' or 'spaghetti and minced meat sauce' constituted the majority of answers in this group, there were also dishes with specified qualifications, such as 'French fish soup' and 'pork fillet risotto'. On the other hand, there were also a considerable number of short, one-word responses, such as 'soup', 'tacos' and 'lasagna'. Consequently, it is notable that of the four meal types, 'Dishes comprising elementary entities' included most variation in terms of separately itemized components of a meal. This is illustrated in Figure 1 through a larger vertical distribution. In relation to 'the level of effort', however, dishes of this type are interpreted as being closer to the group 'Proper meals and menus' than to 'Fast food dishes' or 'Simple dishes and individual parts of a meal'.

Finally, 8–14% of responses included all components of a so-called proper meal or were constructed as menus with several courses ('Proper meals and menus'). These responses contained descriptive words and specific lists of ingredients more often than in the remaining types of meals:

Fish balls in white sauce with potatoes and carrots. (A meal for myself, 'Proper meals and menus', a girl from Norway)

Brazilian fillet of beef and pepper sauce, French fries and salad with yellow peppers. (A meal for myself, 'Proper meals and menus', a boy from Sweden)

On some occasions, responses in this group also included elaborate, restaurant-like foodstuffs, such as fresh herbs, roasted pine nuts or valuable cuts of meat or game. Nonetheless, the majority of responses included quite common ingredients, such as chicken, minced meat or different kinds of root vegetables.

Adolescents' responses (choosing a meal for themselves) were also examined through differences between girls and boys. In summary, it was more common for girls than for boys to mention dishes with both a higher level of effort and a higher level of structural complexity. Gender differences were largest in the groups 'Fast food dishes' and 'Dishes comprising elementary entities'. In all the studied countries, it was more typical for boys (17–41%) than for girls (5–9%) to mention 'Fast food dishes' for themselves. The percentages of Norwegian (41%) and Finnish (26%) boys mentioning fast food dishes were higher than those of Danish (20%) and Swedish (17%) boys. Conversely, in all the countries, 'Dishes Comprising Elementary Entities' were more common among (47–66%) than among boys (37–48%). In this respect, the percentages of Swedish (66%) and Finnish (56%) girls were higher than those of Norwegian (48%) and Danish (47%) girls. All in all, differences between girls and boys were lowest in the Danish data and most apparent in the Norwegian data.

Table 3 Eating with the family by country (scale 1–6; 1 = very seldom, 6 = very often)

Dependent variable	(I) Country	Mean	Dunnett's T3-test		Mean difference (I – J)	Std. Error	P
			(J) Country	Mean			
Do you eat with your family?	Finland	4.3	Norway	4.8	–0.412	0.105	0.000
			Sweden	5.0	–0.633	0.086	0.000
			Denmark	5.1	–0.709	0.098	0.000

Table 4 Distribution of meal types considered as meals for oneself by country

Division of responses within meal types (%)						
	Fast food dishes	Simple dishes and individual parts of a meal	Dishes comprising elementary entities	Proper meals and menus	Total (%)	Total (n)
Finland	16	18	52	14	100	440
Sweden	11	23	57	9	100	281
Norway	25	25	42	8	100	157
Denmark	14	29	45	12	100	192
Total (%)	16	22	51	11	100	1070

Table 5 Distribution of meal types considered as meals for the family by country

Division of responses within meal types (%)						
	Fast food dishes	Simple dishes and individual parts of a meal	Dishes comprising elementary entities	Proper meals and menus	Total (%)	Total (n)
Finland	10	16	59	15	100	440
Sweden	12	21	59	8	100	281
Norway	18	24	52	6	100	157
Denmark	10	19	52	19	100	192
Total (%)	12	19	57	12	100	1070

Table 6 Percentage distribution of meal types considered as meals for the family (horizontally) grouped by meal types considered as meals for oneself (vertically)

Type of meal chosen for oneself	Type of meal chosen for the family			
	Proper meals and menus (%)	Dishes comprising elementary entities (%)	Simple dishes and individual parts of a meal (%)	Fast food dishes (%)
Proper meals and menus	73	21	3	3
Dishes comprising elementary entities	6	79	10	5
Simple dishes and individual parts of a meal	4	39	48	9
Fast food dishes	2	35	19	44

Values in boldface aim to highlight for the reader the percentages of respondents not changing their response between the two situations (Type of meal chosen for the family), thus facilitating quick comparisons between response types.

Comparison of responses according to the two social situations

Firstly, adolescents' responses to the question 'a meal for the family' were outlined according to the four meal types (Table 5).

The differences between countries shown in Table 5 were broadly similar to those in Table 4 but some shifting between the meal types occurs. To further illustrate the nature of this shift, the

tendency to change one's answer according to the two social situations was examined based on the established typology of meals (Table 6).

Cross-tabulations indicate that respondents choosing for themselves 'Dishes comprising elementary entities' or 'Proper meals and menus' are likely to also describe the same type of meal for the family. Conversely, over half of those respondents choosing either 'Fast food dishes' or 'Simple dishes and individual parts of a meal'

for themselves describe a different type of a meal for their family, typically changing their choice for 'Dishes comprising elementary entities'. Results presented in Table 6 were similar for all the studied countries.

Finally, reasons for the tendency to change one's answer between the two social situations (for oneself and for the family) were examined from a qualitative perspective. This confirmed that the majority of the responses included only the name of the chosen dish or meal without further specifications or reasons. Those that had included specifications had in most cases inserted very short or prefix-like additions that could be located in front of the name of the dish. The word 'healthy' was the most common of all qualifications and, altogether, it was mentioned in 26 of the responses. Other examples included qualifications such as easiness, quickness, taste, the word 'home-made' or a reference to a foreign food culture (e.g. 'Chinese', 'Mexican' and 'Greek').

A few respondents had pondered more closely on their choice of food for the family, taking into account the preferences of other family members, or that the meal chosen for the family would be easier to prepare for many people. In a handful of answers, the respondents had pondered their choices from many angles:

It depends . . . if, for example macaroni casserole is on sale, I'll most likely choose that instead of something better, such as vegetable puree soup. . . . (A meal for myself, 'Dishes comprising elementary entities', a girl from Finland)

It depends on what day of the week it is. If it's Friday, I'll choose pizza. On a weekday I'd choose a casserole dish. (A meal for my family, 'Dishes comprising elementary entities', a boy from Norway)

It depends on what I would fancy at the time. I could choose to buy some unhealthy convenience food, or I might as well choose to buy a delicious steak with potatoes, brown sauce, and some beans. (A meal for myself, 'Proper meals and menus', a girl from Denmark)

The responses above include dimensions, such as the price of the food, the mood and desires of the individual and the influence of the week's cycle. The low number of such responses does not allow the establishment of clear patterns in relation to the two social situations (a meal for oneself or a meal for the family). Nonetheless, the responses give us a glimpse of the different factors that the respondents associate with the process of choosing what to eat in different situations.

Discussion

The article aimed to deepen our understanding of Nordic adolescents' meal choices in different social situations. As shown, gender did not have a statistically significant effect on eating with the family. In all countries but Denmark, the number of parents in the family had some relevance in terms of frequency of family meals. Comparisons between countries indicated that eating with the family was not as common in Finland as it was in the remaining data. These results are in line with a previous comparative Nordic study (Holm, 2001).

Analyses of open-ended questions showed that over half the adolescents would have chosen for themselves meals echoing or fully meeting the structural definition of a 'proper meal', and

that these types of meals were even more common when describing meals for the family. Respondents choosing low-effort meals for themselves had a high tendency to change their response and to describe a family meal with a higher level of effort and structural complexity. Similarly, Holsten *et al.* (2012) concluded that effort level and skill level limited children's food choices when parents were not at home and when the child was responsible of picking and preparing food. Furthermore, children emphasized quick and easy food preparation when time was limited or eating was not prioritized as an activity (Holsten *et al.*, 2012).

The analysis of the open-ended questions also revealed differences between girls and boys; these were lowest in the Danish data and most apparent among Norwegian respondents. Nearly half of the Norwegian boys mentioned 'Fast food dishes' in their meal choices for themselves. In a Norwegian study, Bahr Bugge (2011) found that eating fatty and sugary food was more characteristic of boys than of girls. Although fast food consumption has increased generally, the topic emerged also as a contradictory issue among the young people (Bahr Bugge, 2011). Unfortunately, these data do not allow further conclusions about the food-cultural status of fast foods from the perspective of Nordic adolescents. It does, nonetheless, indicate that further comparative research on fast foods and young people might help us better understand how adolescents interpret and justify their meal choices. In previous studies, location, price and sociability have been identified as important reasons to adolescents for choosing fast foods (Bugge *et al.*, 2009; Wills *et al.*, 2009; Wenzer, 2010) but there may also be other factors to consider.

A central strength of this study is a research design comprising data from four Nordic countries. The low number of inappropriate answers in the open-ended answers indicates that the great majority of respondents answered the questions to their best ability. However, the number of unclear responses indicates that these questions might have been difficult to answer for some adolescents. This is a limitation that should be taken into account when drawing conclusions of the results and when designing studies with similar aims in the future. Perhaps, for this group of respondents, an interactive data collection method would have helped in generating more specific answers. In terms of questionnaire design, corresponding surveys in the future might benefit from including data on a wider range of social situations, such as different kinds of peer groups and a wider selection of background variables with a focus on family meals. Furthermore, because the data are not representative on a national level, it would be interesting to see if similar tendencies emerge from nationally generalizable comparative data.

Combining quantitative and qualitative approaches in the analyses enabled comparisons both on the level of nationalities and on the level of individual respondents. An advantage of the formulation of the open-ended questions was that it allowed respondents to emphasize factors that they themselves experienced as important. However, the analysis of the open-ended data also presented several challenges, such as large variations in the specificity of the answers. Nonetheless, the established typology succeeds well in depicting the wider trends present in these data. Future studies could benefit from gathering more specific data on whether the meal is bought or self-prepared, what stages the food preparation process includes and to what extent ready-

made products and convenience foods are used as part of food preparation. Moreover, further work is needed not only on the number of adolescents eating in a so-called unhealthy way, but also on what kinds of meals they are familiar with and what justifications they give for their everyday choices in changing social landscapes.

Conclusions

Eating with the family was relatively common among the studied adolescents, although differences exist on the basis of the number of parents in the family and the country of origin. Adolescents appear to have a good understanding of the traditional construction of a meal and tend to follow the structure of 'a proper meal' especially when describing meals for their family. The difference between the two social situations was most apparent for those who mentioned 'Fast food dishes' for themselves. This indicates that, at least for this group of adolescents, the socializing effects of family meals or even the ability to describe the construction of a 'proper meal' might not affect meal choices across social contexts. Educators and researchers interested in young people's relationship to food should be aware of this situational variation. Context-bound data – anchored in interaction and adolescents' own reasoning – would help us gain a deeper understanding of the connections of different social situations and meal choices.

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