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Taking humour seriously in contemporary food research

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Abstract

This paper highlights the social significance of humour in everyday interactions with food within families and related household contexts. The paper approaches humour in relational terms, emphasising its role in negotiating the way power is exercised within the moralized context of "feeding the family". Having reviewed previous work on the social significance of humour, the paper provides some examples of food-related humour from recent research with British food consumers, illustrating what such occasions reveal about participants' relations with each other, with us as researchers, and with the food they consume. Specifically, participants were found to use apologetic and self-deprecating humour to negotiate the moral ambiguities of food and to cover potentially embarrassing situations; to express familiarity and disgust regarding their current consumption practices; and to excuse potentially shameful behaviour or guilty pleasures. The paper argues that an understanding of the "background disposition" through which consumers make sense of their multiple encounters with food is critical to the analysis of food-related humour and that ethnographic methods are particularly adept at revealing the social context in which humour occurs.

Keywords: food consumption, humour, background disposition, moralization

Introduction

There is a long tradition of socio-linguistic research on humour using conversation analysis and related methods (see, for example, Powell & Paton 1988; Palmer 2003; Glenn 2009), but there has been surprisingly little research on food-related humour where occasions for laughter are frequently disregarded or relegated to the brackets in interview and focus group transcripts. The relational character of humour has been acknowledged since the earliest anthropological research on joking relationships (Radcliffe-Brown 1940) and there is increasing acknowledgement of humour's potential significance in revealing key aspects of our social relations, saying "something important about the human condition" (Watson, 2015: 407). This paper strives to takes humour seriously, analysing its role in everyday interactions around food, based on ethnographically-informed research with a range of British households.

Despite the increasing interest in food and language, there has been relatively little research on the relationship between food and humour. For example, Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson's account of 'what we talk about when we talk about food' says much about how food-talk provides "pleasure for the senses and sustenance for the soul" (2014: 203) but very little specifically about humour. Shoshana Blum-Kulka (1997) draws on recorded conversations and interviews with Israeli and American families, showing how dinner talk constructs, reflects and invokes familial, social and cultural identities, including the socialization of children – without much attention to humour. Asking 'what words bring to the table', Jillian Cavanaugh and colleagues focus on the parallels between food and language as "semiotic systems that engage sensually, embodied forms in the expression of socioculturally situated meanings" (Cavanaugh et al. 2014: 85) rather than on humour per se. Similarly, Riley and Cavanaugh's (2017) discussion of 'tasty talk, expressive food' shows how food is structured like language, distinguishing four analytic heuristics: language through food (food as an expressive medium); language about food (discourses on food); language around food (food's iconic, indexical and symbolic associations); and language as food (communication as a form of nourishment). But there is little or no discussion of humour. Even when the comic dimensions of food are directly engaged, as in Hobbis's (2017) account of food, humour and language politics in Quebec, the emphasis is on the analysis of media discourse rather than everyday conversations.

While humour and laughter are often analysed in combination, they are analytically distinct as laughter can result from many circumstances, not all of which are a response to humorous remarks or situations, and laughter can occur in circumstances that were not intended to be humorous.[1] In what follows, we analyse several types of humour that arose in our research on contemporary food consumption, some of which gave rise to laughter and some of which did not. The paper's main

contribution is to suggest that humour provides a valuable index of current social anxieties about food, particularly those that arise in the context of "feeding the family" (as expressed by Marjorie De Vault (1991) in her pioneering study of the social organization of domestic work). We also argue that food is a particularly promising site for exploring the methodological and social significance of humour, given its centrality to everyday life, its vital role in the expression of embodied identities, its pervasive presence on TV and other media, and its strongly moralized character (cf. Warde, 1997; Jackson, 2009). Warde argues, in particular, that the use of convenience food is nearly always "tinged with moral disapprobation" (1999: 518), an issue that we have explored in greater depth in our recent empirical work on the consumption of (various kinds of) convenience food (Jackson et al. 2018). This provides a key context for our analysis of food-related humour in contemporary family life.

Focusing on three different kinds of humour that arose in our research, we wish to argue that such occasions are significant in shedding light on our participants' relations to each other, to us as researchers and to the food they consume. Humour, we argue, should not be dismissed, ignored or glossed over by researchers. It has the potential to reveal important things about contemporary attitudes towards food including questions of ethics and responsibility, moralization and guilt, anxiety and blame. We begin by outlining some previous work on the social significance of humour before providing an account of the methods employed in our research with British consumers. That research uncovered multiple forms of humour including the use of apologetic and self-deprecating humour to negotiate the moralization of food and to cover potentially embarrassing situations; humorous expressions of familiarity and disgust regarding participants' current consumption practices; and the use of humour to excuse potentially shameful behaviour or guilty pleasures.

As well as illustrating that ethnographic and related methods are particularly adept at revealing the context in which humour arises, the paper concludes that an understanding of the "background disposition" (Macpherson 2008) through which people make sense of their diverse encounters with food is critical to the analysis of food-related humour. Macpherson appears to have coined the term "background disposition" but it has clear similarities to Bourdieu's concept of "disposition" including how a system of dispositions coheres to form a *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977). In the present context, the term refers to the ordering framework through which people make sense of food, including the idea that food is socially valued, forming a material and moral bond within family life. This ordering framework, we argue, is relevant to most if not all food-related occasions, even among those who see food in more pragmatic terms ("food as fuel"), devoid of wider social or cultural significance. The "background disposition" to which we refer is particularly prominent in contemporary discourses of "healthy eating" and concerns about the alleged decline of the family meal. It is also

evident in strictures about the avoidance of food waste, contrasting the perceived virtues of thrift and economy with accusations of consumer profligacy (cf. Evans 2011). Despite its normative power and its role in shaping food-related humour, we acknowledge that this background disposition takes multiple forms and is negotiated differently according to one's social position. Rather than seeking to identify a single or universal set of social norms in our participants' diverse encounters with food, we aim to show how different forms of humour highlight food's variable social and cultural significance.

The social significance of humour

The social significance of humour is often discussed in terms of three main theories. With its roots in the work of Plato and Aristotle, the *superiority* theory of humour includes those who take delight in other people's misfortune. The *relief* theory explains humour in terms of the reduction of psychological tension where laughter results from the release of nervous energy. Often seen in psychoanalytical terms, this form of humour functions to overcome inhibition and, following Freud, to reveal or conceal suppressed desire. A third theory, originating with Kant and Hegel, emphasises the humorous potential of *incongruity*, including occasions that involve the recognition of inappropriate juxtaposition.[2] All of these theories could be applied, to varying degrees, in the analysis of our empirical material; however, in what follows, we seek to narrow our analytical focus to the social significance of food-related humour within everyday life. Such humour takes multiple forms from nervous laughter to unbridled hilarity. In a recent review of the situated and multiple nature of humour, for example, Ridanpää (2014) identifies irony and self-deprecating humour, caricature and cartoons, sarcasm, parody and irony, satire and buffoonery, which play a variety of roles, maintaining or challenging boundaries, exercising or relinquishing power, subverting or reinforcing stereotypes.

Socio-linguistic research on humour has explored its relational significance in various settings and its role in shaping everyday power relations. For example, Holmes and Marra (2002) examine how humour functions in routine interactions within the workplace, noting that whilst it can be used to express collegiality and reduce power imbalances, it can also involve barbed comments signalling competition and potential confrontation. Such interactions are often highly gendered (Holmes 2006), where humour is used to display affiliation, friendliness and intimacy, with the potential to

mock, deride or belittle others – where the distinction between laughing *at* and laughing *with* can be useful (Glenn 2009).

Previous work on the social significance of humour has also examined its function as a distancing mechanism, helping those in stressful occupations cope with the physical and emotional demands of their work (Sanders, 2004). Humour can be used as a form of resistance in hierarchical settings, where rank-and-file team members use humour to resist or attenuate instructions from more powerful colleagues (Griffiths 1998). So, for example, Coser (1960) studied humour and the role of laughter among colleagues in a mental hospital, while Linstead (1985) studied the opposition between resistance and control in the organizational culture of a manufacturing company. More recently, Schnurr and Rowe (2008) studied the subversive potential of workplace emails in expressing frustration and dissent, while Browne (2016) studied the role of conversational humour in the exploration of sustainability practices. Browne's work also has a methodological dimension, suggesting that humour may help focus-group participants overcome the social awkwardness that is associated with taboo subjects and intimate practices (such as showering and doing the laundry). That humour is capable of subverting hierarchy and challenging authority – as in Bakhtin's (1984) work on the Carnivalesque – should be placed alongside those who argue that it is simply a coping mechanism that does not actually change oppressive situations (Gouin, 2004: 40), while others insist that humour can have a harder edge, as in the oppressive form of racist jokes and ethnic stereotyping (Billig, 2001).

The use of irony is particularly significant in terms of social power, its double-edged nature having the potential to re-inscribe the very forces that it seeks to undermine (cf. Hutcheon, 1991). Hutcheon suggests that irony involves speaking with a doubled voice, saying one thing and meaning another, its power depending on the twin conditions of context and community of belief (1991: 1-2).[3] While irony can lend humour a critical edge, its semantic complexity gives rise to multiple interpretations depending on the discursive communities within which it is expressed. This raises questions of intention and attribution, reinforcing the importance of social context. As Hutcheon's (1994) work on the "Into the Heart of Africa" exhibition at the Royal Ontario Museum demonstrates, the museum's intentions to offer an ironic critique of Canada's missionary and military presence in Africa were widely (mis)understood as perpetuating precisely the kind of imperialist representations they sought to challenge.

Two further studies that are particularly closely aligned with our own work are Hannah Macpherson's (2008) research on the role of humour and laughter in undertaking fieldwork with visually impaired walking groups in the English Lake District, and Kristiina Janhonen's (2017) work on

the role of humour in focus groups with young people regarding their consumption of school meals in Finland. Macpherson argues that humour and laughter do serious work that can "reveal shared understandings, communicate disapproval, mark a point at which consensus is threatened, narrow communicative distances, or be used as a potentially subversive force" (2008: 1082). Mobilizing the concept of "background disposition", Macpherson shows how the idea that visually impaired and disabled people are the object of pity provides an opportunity to mobilize subversive forms of "crip" humour to resist this subject positioning. Significantly, too, such humour can be shared within the group while it may not be tolerated from those outside it. If humour often involves the "violation of normality" (Veatch, 1998), then one must have an understanding of what is normal in any given context in order to "get the joke". While a "background disposition" (regarding the importance of 'health eating', for example) can have considerable normative power, we do not want to suggest that it is static or homogeneous. Rather, we suggest, humour can be seen to involve the negotiation of competing norms where our research participants are differentially located according to their social positioning. This argument will be clarified and further illustrated in the presentation of our empirical material (below).

Among the few studies that deal with food-related humour, Kristiina Janhonen's (2017) work focuses on young Finnish people's discussions concerning the quality of school meals. In a context where the "background disposition" among students is a general disdain for the quality of school food, her participants used humour to construct "us and them" boundaries, to negotiate social order (including instances of rule-breaking), and to engage in fun and safe interactions (providing amusement among peers). Food is often used to express a desire to belong, as Ludvigsen and Scott (2009) argue in their discussion of food as "social camouflage", helping children "fit in" at school by adopting stereotypically gendered roles. Similarly, Janhonen argues, humour functions as "emotional currency" and can work as a social unifier or divider (2017: 1129). Humour is situationally dependent and socially relational, depending on the intended audience and their ability to share the joke. Janhonen also shows how good-humoured and friendly banter can tip over into sharper forms of humour such as ridicule, where an individual becomes the target of laughter, temporarily excluded from the rest of the group.[4]

Research methods

The following sections report examples of the various forms of humour that were encountered in two recent research projects. One concerns the use of various kinds of "convenience" foods; the

other explores the enactment of "freshness" in the UK agri-food sectors.[5] The first project sought to challenge existing accounts of convenience food as inherently unhealthy and unsustainable. It highlighted the diversity of the category and then used data from four European countries to explore how convenience food is used in combination with other foods including fresh food, cooked from scratch. By examining how convenience food is used in practice, we were able to highlight the deeply moralized character of the discourse around convenience food and to explore the policy implications of alternative framings (Jackson et al., 2018a). The second project explored the significance of 'freshness' as a key attribute of food from the perspective of producers and consumers. While fresh food is frequently assumed to be pure, natural and local, it is often the product of highly industrialised processes such as refrigeration and long-distance transportation. Our research explored these paradoxes, tracing the practical consequences of different enactments of 'freshness' in the UK and Portugal (Jackson et al., 2018b).

The research for these projects included interviews, accompanied shopping trips, kitchen "go-alongs" (Kusenbach 2003), 'tasting events',[6] and various photographic and video methods (some of which were self-recorded by the participants without a researcher being physically present). Despite their different focus, the two projects shared a similar (ethnographically-informed) methodology, designed to observe how household food practices are negotiated within the exigencies of everyday life. Consequently, the basis of analysis was not primarily the interview transcripts, but hundreds of pages of field-notes designed to capture the 'doings and sayings' (Schatzki ,1996: 89) of everyday life. These included stills from video footage, extensive explanatory notes and reflexive questions. The aim was to build as rich a picture as possible for other members of the research team reading these notes, acknowledging that different interpretations might be made by those not directly involved with the participants.[7] Consequently, the field notes were both a document of what happened, and – more importantly – a device for triggering new analysis (Jackson, 1990: 20).

Participants were recruited through Angela's social networks and via local organizations in South Yorkshire and North Derbyshire. They were socially diverse in terms of gender and ethnicity, occupation and education, age and household composition, and included people from urban and rural areas. While we draw on only a handful of examples in what follows, they are taken from a much larger number of cases involving 22 households and 37 individuals across the two research projects. Participants are referred to by pseudonyms in order to protect their anonymity.[8]

In neither project was humour the initial object of inquiry. However, as the convenience study progressed, we became increasingly aware of its potential significance, particularly in relation to the moralization of food choice, prompting us to undertake a more systematic search of our material.

We began by noting cases where laughter occurred and then widened the search to include other forms of humour, drawing on our knowledge of the full dataset. By the time we began work on the freshness study, Angela was highlighting different forms of humour in her field-notes.

During our analysis, we reviewed field-notes carefully, attending to the social context of specific occasions for humour. The analysis also benefited from Angela's longer-term observation of participants in their domestic context, at home and on accompanied shopping trips, sitting in their kitchens and watching them cook. It was further enriched by our use of video recording and photography. Not only did this add depth, detail and nuance to our understanding of the context in which humour arose. It also meant that we could repeatedly revisit the data to look for things which may have been missed in the initial analysis, or look again with a fresh interpretative lens (cf. Meah, 2016). These research encounters were undoubtedly shaped in terms of shared understandings and/or different experiences by Angela's positionality as a woman of mixed (British-Asian) heritage, from a working-class background, who grew up in the north of England.

In each of the examples that follow, we have returned to the original video recordings in order to grasp the significance of intonation, hesitation and other verbal cues that may not have been noted in the interview data most of which were produced before humour became an object of analysis. Through a close reading of the data, combined with our knowledge of the literature on food and humour, we identified three broad categories of humour: apologetic, embarrassed and self-deprecating humour; familiarity and disgust; and dark humour, shame and guilty pleasure.

Apologetic, embarrassed and self-deprecating humour

Following an existing interest in "unapologetic apologies" which often take the form "I'm sorry, but…" and signify the way food practices are moralized (Meah & Jackson, 2013), our first examples concern the use of apologetic or self-deprecating humour to excuse the speaker for taking culinary short-cuts or adopting other practices, such as the use of convenience food, for which participants anticipate negative judgement, causing potential embarrassment. These episodes occurred on several occasions during our fieldwork and reflect the "background disposition" that food is a highly moralized subject; that "feeding the family" is a serious business; that the excessive use of convenience food can be seen as an abrogation of domestic (particularly maternal) responsibility; and that food raises critical issues in terms of class distinction.[9]

Gloria and Jack are in their 40s and live in social housing, along with Gloria's adult son. Jack is an engineer and Gloria is a housing officer for the local authority. Both enjoy cooking and the couple

like to watch cooking programmes on TV. Gloria is a prolific baker and is confident in the kitchen, while Jack likes to try out new recipe ideas, acknowledging that finding time to cook is a challenge. During their initial interview, Gloria discussed a meal that she had prepared the previous evening consisting of a chicken pie with a vegetable accompaniment, made using a combination of fresh and prepared ingredients, including ready-made puff pastry, a packet of stuffing mix and instant gravy granules. As she lists the ingredients, she laughs and says "it sounds as if we eat convenience food all the time" before adding that they also had potatoes in cheese sauce. Regardless of our neutrality as researchers, carefully avoiding normative judgements about different kinds of food, it is clear that Gloria anticipated a negative assessment of her culinary short-cuts and "convenient" food choices.

Video recordings made by the couple reveal how Gloria will sometimes cook meals completely from scratch, including making her own short-crust pastry. The footage also illustrates how the wider obligations around which provisioning must be negotiated impact on her cooking practices. For example, in one evening's self-recorded video footage, Gloria informs her imagined audience: "Today we're having convenience food". She explains that the meal will consist of fish-fingers, frozen peas, left-over potatoes and frozen hash-browns and a can of chicken curry for Jack. Holding up the tin, she says with a dramatic flourish: "Ta-da! Here's one I prepared earlier".[10]

Opening the tin, she adds: "as you know, it's very hard to make chicken curry, I'll struggle with me tin-opener [laughs]". She continues: "This is my 'can't-be-bothered-to-make-anything' meal… I've been to the gym and I'm tired [laughs]". While being matter-of-fact about what she is preparing for the evening meal, Gloria nonetheless feels the need, on this occasion, to explain or justify her provisioning practices to her imagined audience. When writing up the notes about the couple's video footage, we applied what Barbara Gibson (2005) refers to as the "movie method" of analysis in order to assess the extent to which the "absent presence" of the researcher may have an impact on what was recorded. In a subsequent interview, Angela asked Gloria who her imagined audience was and what story she was trying to tell:

Gloria	I've no idea [laughs]
Angela	*Where you thinking of me?*
Gloria	No, other people who might be watching…
Angela	*What was the "story" that you were trying to tell us?*
Gloria	[laughs] That we do eat healthily sometimes. I don't know, that we eat varied things. I don't know….

Gloria's response implies that although the researcher may have assured her that she, personally, would not be judging participants' practices, there remains a lack of certainty about the potential

responses of unknown others who might be less "forgiving". Given the damning representation of a group of British mothers dubbed "sinner ladies" in Britain's tabloid press (Fox & Smith 2011) after they were pictured passing children take-away food through the railings of a school in Rawmarsh, South Yorkshire, Gloria's sensibilities are completely understandable. That her unspoken concerns are valid is reflected in studies of audience responses to the Rawmarsh mothers (see Hollows & Jones, 2010; Rich, 2011) which reveal the extent to which food practices are moralized. For example, Nick Piper (2013) analyses the way TV programmes such as *Jamie's Ministry of Food* provide audiences with a common cultural resource for negotiating the boundaries of class, place and gender in their everyday lives. These boundaries, Piper argues, are negotiated reflexively through notions of embarrassment and voyeurism.

Apologetic or embarrassed laughter also characterised our conversations with other participants including Ted, a retired professional who at first denied using convenience food: "It's not a term I think of very much". A short while later, realising that he had run out of an ingredient that he would ordinarily have made himself, he was forced to acknowledge: "You've caught me in a very embarrassing moment, having bought a jar of preserved lemons [laughs]". In this instance, Ted's embarrassment is heightened by his long-standing relationship with Angela and the knowledge that she would probably remind him of his earlier denial. As indicated in our previous research concerning culinary "short-cuts" (Meah & Jackson, 2013), self-consciousness and embarrassment were relatively rare on the part of middle-class participants who were less concerned about the potential for being judged. Where awareness was acknowledged, they were more likely to explain their practices in "unapologetic" terms. By contrast, working-class participants such as Gloria were more self-conscious about the prospect of negative social judgment, using humour to deflect such criticism.

These examples of apologetic, self-deprecating humour and embarrassment all stem, we argue, from the "background disposition" of food's social value and its central place within the moral discourse attached to "feeding the family". While participants were differentially positioned with respect to this discourse, in class and gender terms, all implicitly acknowledged the moral force that is attached to "healthy eating". While the charge may be more strongly felt by working-class women such as Gloria, worrying about her use of tinned curry and other convenience foods, than middle-class men such as Ted, mildly embarrassed to have been discovered using a jar of preserved lemons, the "background disposition" seems to apply across a wide range of participants.

Familiarity and disgust

As a well-informed, middle-class individual, Ted was well-aware, and somewhat dismissive, of official guidance concerning food safety and related issues. Our work with Ted and his wife Laura (both in their 70s) spans several years, involving multiple family members across numerous projects. Many hours spent in the couple's kitchen were punctuated with frequent laughter. While some featured culinary *faux pas* on Ted's part, other incidents occurred in relation to humorous anecdotes, often involving other family members. These include the following account regarding an out-of-date jar of pickle which arose during a discussion of use-by and best-before date labels, which Ted says he "completely ignores". Ted asks: "We must have told you the story about the Branston pickle?", going on to explain a visit they paid to Laura's father in the late 1980s. Ted reports that he had been making himself a sandwich and, when he asked his father-in-law if he had any pickle, was directed to a jar of Branston pickle bearing an Olympic logo. Ted had initially assumed that this was from the most recent Games but, on closer inspection, it was revealed to refer to the Munich Olympics, held in 1972, confirming that the pickle was 17 years old. Rather than being deterred by its age, Ted proceeded to carry out a series of sensory inspections, concluding:

Ted	It smelled a bit strong, but Branston pickle lasts forever I think
Angela	*[Much laughter] …*
Ted	Seventeen years old, but it seemed fine [imitates sniffing], you can tell by looking at it, there's no mould.
Angela	*That explains a lot. Now I know why you're the way you are [laughs].*

While Angela's response highlights the rapport she has built up with the family over several years, the story has clearly been told before and is something of a family favourite. The incident highlights the importance of sensory assessments of food (in this case using smell and sight to judge when it is considered safe to eat), compared to official guidance about adhering to use-by dates.

Later in the interview, Ted repeats his disregard for date labels when talking about the upmarket food retailer Waitrose. Referring to his habit of browsing foods that are close to their expiry date (in this case "a bit of pork fillet"), he says "And of course, if Waitrose say this is out of date, that means that it's really safe [half laughs]". His sarcastic tone here can be interpreted as a reflection of Ted's knowledge that he is flaunting official food safety advice but that he trusts his own judgement: "it might not look very good, but it won't kill you". Some months later, accompanying Ted shopping, Angela wrote in her field-notes: *I think he's on the lookout for some salami/spicy sausage reductions. He says: "he hasn't got any, that's a shame"*.

The same family gave another example of the embodied and sensory nature of freshness, this time in relation to cheese. The story is told by Laura and relates to a recent incident when, at the end of a Christmas visit, their daughter-in-law's mother "piled all this cheese on us" including half a Stilton. The couple took the cheese on their journey to visit their daughter in Scotland, where her fridge was already full. The cheese was consequently stored near the front door, where it became increasingly ripe and smelly and did not get eaten. It was then taken on the next leg of the couple's journey to visit Ted's brother, where it was "released" it from its plastic wrapper: "WHOOSH! [laughter]", prompting Ted's sister-in-law to declare: "It's gotta go in the garden, I'm not having it in the house". At the time of interview, the Stilton remained in Ted and Laura's fridge, having travelled back home with them when the festive season was over. Telling the story led to a discussion of how to assess when products such as Stilton are no longer edible:

Laura	When it's grey, when it goes grey … Stilton is something I used to eat a lot of, it goes grey when it gets really old, it also gets dry.
Ted	But I don't know at what point it becomes dangerous, months?
Laura	It gets really nasty.
Ted	Soft cheese like Camembert and brie go hard when they're old.
Angela	*Staleness?*
Ted	But you can still eat them.
Laura	But I think there is something, for me anyway, it just doesn't look appetising … Well it's not something I want inside my body [laughs], it does become disgusting in a way that a black banana doesn't [laughs].

This example uses humour to reflect on familial relations and different standards of acceptable culinary behaviour. It highlights the different practices for maintaining food quality (from plastic wrapping to refrigeration) and how this may be affected by the material qualities of different products (such as an over-ripe Stilton). It also shows how domestic circumstances, particularly at Christmas-time, may lead to hygiene and food-safety standards being compromised.[11] The latter part of the extract returns to the subjective and embodied nature of judgements about food including how issues of quality (colour, texture, smell) bleed into questions about food safety and food waste (cf. Watson & Meah, 2013). The extract also reflects the habitual and routine nature of food consumption ("I used to eat a lot of it") and how emotions connected to food (such as disgust) reflect its embodied and visceral character ("not something I want inside my body").[12]

Though an occasion for humour, familiar stories such as these shed light on a host of issues concerning health and hygiene, food qualities and conventions, and the routinized nature of

everyday life. But they only make sense and are seen as humorous when framed by a "background disposition" that assumes a certain expected mode of behaviour regarding food safety and hygiene standards.

Dark humour, shame and guilty pleasures

While Ted was a particularly colourful example of someone who expressed a reasoned disregard for food-related health concerns, our final example comes from Tony, a 56-year-old professional from a working-class background, who made visible the tensions encountered by those who have experienced upward social mobility through access to higher education. There are some 40 examples of laughter in our interviews with Tony, many of them reflecting on the place of food in his previous, emotionally strained, home life with his wife and daughter. Tony laughed about his use of convenience food including Cup-a-Soups, Pot Noodles and ready-meals, but he also maintained that since recently moving out of the family home, he now has more regular eating habits and more established domestic routines "because I like coming home more". At one point, he "confesses" to going out on a Friday night with friends when "we do tend to booze our way through the evening". He adds: "I'll come back and … make a disgusting pile of slop [laughs] which I really like doing actually".

Tony talks reflexively about how problematic meals had become during the last year living with his wife and anorexic daughter. Now, he says, he enjoys shopping for himself. Lowering his voice, he admits: "Pot Noodles are my secret vice … and I did have a couple of meatballs for breakfast this morning [laughs] as a little treat, it sounds terrible". Tony is aware that his eating, smoking and drinking habits fall short of current public health guidance – and he explains his "guilty pleasures" in the language of treats and rewards. But he is only semi-apologetic about his cooking and eating practices, including the consumption of what he refers to as "disgusting" food.

Tony also speaks of his first Christmas apart from his family, misinterpreting Angela's horrified expression at the image of him eating a ready-meal on his own for Christmas dinner. He responds: "I did, yes. I had several different types [laughs]. I know all the Tesco Finest range … it was like a mini treat… I had a Finest cottage pie last night, it was actually very nice". His insistence that the meals were from a supermarket's premium range and that "it was actually very nice" attest to his knowledge of the socially-denigrated nature of convenience food and his preference for other interpretive frames. His awareness of the strongly moralized "background disposition" surrounding

food and body-image and the shaming attitudes with which they are commonly associated are reflected in Tony's articulation of a counter-discourse in accounting for his actions:

Tony	But what I do do quite a lot I think, is about the shame thing, is make a, a bit like everything else, like the overweight thing, is turn it into a joke, self-deprecating joke, so I do draw attention sometimes, it's a big joke [among his colleagues], me and my Pot Noodles, for example. I've mentioned them a few times haven't I? I actually went on a date last week and I told her about my Pot Noodles,
Angela	*See how she reacts to that [laughs]...*
Tony	So I kind of make a point of [long pause, trying to formulate the words] talking about things, sort of that, so it's not real shame, but it's definitely awareness,
Angela	*Or awareness of the discourse?*
Tony	Yeah, so there's a counterattack, maybe in some ways I'm being [pause] slightly cool, alternative, by eating packets and things, y'know, that sort of thing.

Tony also laughs about his aversion to taking leftover food to work in a plastic (Tupperware) container. Reflecting on the reasons for this, he elaborates: "I think there's something psychological … which goes back to my childhood and the whole working-class thing, the obsession around money and food. There's something, I find it just [pause] sort of shameful and vulgar". This is very different from other families with the same professional status, such as Ted and Laura, who make a virtue of using leftover food as a positive way of avoiding food waste.

This is a perfect illustration of the way an individual's access to education and upward career trajectory may allow them to distance themselves from the moral opprobrium that is attached to certain food practices such as the consumption of convenience food. While Tony has the cultural capital to negotiate 'healthy eating' advice and Ted can cheerfully flaunt best-practice advice on food expiry dates, awareness of her social positioning appears to make Gloria more aware of and apologetic about practices which are deemed to be 'shameful', anticipating a critical reception from her imagined audience, including us as researchers. Without placing too much reliance on a handful of examples, our evidence shows how participants use humour to negotiate food's contested moral framing, negotiating their social positioning with respect to the relevant "background disposition".

Later on, Tony self-recorded some video footage of a mid-week evening when he came home "steaming drunk" after a session in the pub with his colleagues. It was close to midnight and he prepares himself a quick evening meal consisting of two different flavours of canned soup, a packet of instant noodles and some pre-grated cheese. Tony provides a running commentary while cooking which he captures on film. Trying to turn the camera on, he asks: "Are you working. Jesus. Hell, I'm a

trifle drunk". Unlike Gloria, who imagines "other people who might be watching", Tony addresses Angela directly throughout the recording, referring to events he had previously discussed with her. Saying that this is going to be "the worst research thing ever" and "a really bad idea", he compares himself to a television chef who was notorious for presenting programmes having had a lot to drink: "It's Keith Floyd here, can you see me? Hello, it's Tony here, and I've no idea if this is recording but, er, I'm [real name] by the way, not [real name] and I've never been so confused by cooking". He goes to what he calls his "cupboard of shame" and retrieves two cans of soup: "Beef and vegetable and I've got, er, lentil and bacon". He goes on, in heavily parodic mode: "So what I'm gonna do … beef vegetable soup supreme from soup-preme Aldi, which is basically shit … and some more shit supreme as well, lentil and bacon, that's going in the pan too". He then adds a packet of instant noodles and the accompanying "powdery sachet thing" [flavouring]. "OK", he says, "you're gonna love this, grated cheese. I'll just [pause] put the whole fucking lot in". Stirring it all with a wooden salad server he has retrieved from a drawer, he explains that he was left with "very few spoon-related things when I was kicked out of my family home by my angry wife". Blowing a kind of half-hearted theatrical kiss to the camera, he sits down to eat and turns the camera off.[13]

These late-night cooking and eating episodes were, he says, something he used to do a lot when he was married, describing it as "like my [pause] private space, it was a way of creating a space for me, again, a treat, just for me, the sort of thing nobody else would want to share particularly, or approve of either. It was like my little world and I liked it". In the video footage, Tony acknowledges how he is placing himself in a position of vulnerability in "opening up to the world" by describing how he left his marital home (or "when I was made to leave, I should say, it sounds terribly depressing, doesn't it?)". Interestingly, the story is told without laughter but with a wry, dark humour which reveals a bitterness that had been absent in his previous (sober) discussions with Angela. It was, he says, "elementally psychological, comfort food … gooey … a very oral experience … something almost foetal about [pause] curling up on the couch with the telly on, spooning this gunge into my mouth". This is another kind of humour, devoid of laughter, but full of meaning in terms of Tony's personal relationships as reflected through his use of food.

These examples confirm that humour is not always associated with laughter and can take many forms, some of which have a darker tone and a reflexive undercurrent. The range of examples in this and the two preceding sections demonstrate the strongly moralized nature of food's "background disposition", its multiple forms and the many ways it can be negotiated by participants who occupy different (classed and gendered) subject positions.

Conclusions

Acknowledging the general dearth of research on food-related humour, our analysis has taken humour seriously, as advocated by Palmer (2003), attending to the way that different occasions for humour shed light on contemporary attitudes to food. Palmer explores the social functions, narrative structure and limits of humour, also reflecting on questions of performance and audience. All of these issues are relevant to the use of humour in our research on food. In particular, we have argued that the "background disposition" is critical in understanding how our participants mobilize humour in relation to food and how laughter arises, whether self-consciously or not, in their food-related encounters. Without understanding the way food is moralized within contemporary family life and the way certain kinds of food and ways of cooking are privileged over others, it would be impossible to understand the way our participants use humour to excuse their use of convenience foods or their recourse to culinary short-cuts. We have also suggested that the specific ways in which they interact with the "background disposition" can be related to their social positioning and trajectory through life. This suggests that moral dispositions towards food are multiple and contested rather than fixed or stable, further highlighting the social significance of food-related humour.[14]

Humour can also be used to circumvent feelings of anxiety and guilt, serving to deflect criticism from behaviours that fall short of a socially-normative ideal. Some participants laugh at themselves when gaps are revealed between their public protestations and their observed practices or when they want to distance themselves from official advice concerning date labels, "healthy eating" or food safety. Laughter also arises when boundaries are crossed, awkward juxtapositions occur or difficult encounters need to be negotiated. There are many instances in our data where participants rehearse familiar stories for the delight and amusement of other family members. In other cases, laughter is a way of deflecting criticism at perceived deficiencies in culinary knowledge, where everyday practices fall short of perceived cultural norms. This is not the kind of ironic humour that requires a certain amount of critical distance or the kind of sarcasm that implies social superiority. Rather, we suggest, it is a way of laughing off the potentially wounding effects of stereotyping, where power is wielded in a more or less direct way (as exemplified by the moral condemnation meted out to the "sinner ladies" in Rawmarsh, feeding "junk food" to their children in the schoolyard).

Our examples are not easily categorized in terms of existing theories of humour such as the three-fold typology of relief, superiority or incongruity outlined in the introduction, though traces of all three are present in our data. Rather, we suggest, it is the "background disposition" and its social

contestation that are critical in understanding the social significance of food-related humour and why humour is such a good index of the social attitudes that are attached to food. Its intimate connection to our everyday lives and embodied identities also helps explain why food is such a good "lens" on the social relations within which it is embedded.[15] This also explains why ethnographic methods, including the observation of participants engaging in mundane shopping, cooking and eating practices, provide such an apt way to understand food-related humour rather than relying exclusively on the textual analysis of interview or focus group transcripts.[16] Ethnographic research also raises important ethical issues and questions of positionality as humour arises through relations between research participants and researchers, as well as through participants' relations with socially significant others and with different kinds of food.

As Alison Browne (2016) concludes in her analysis of water consumption and sustainable resource use, taking humour seriously can enhance our understanding of the dynamics of everyday practices, providing evidence regarding routine behaviours and cultural conventions; showing how social norms are reproduced and challenged; and revealing the links between the normative and the performative, the material and the discursive. Taking humour seriously, we argue, can also help researchers understand the social significance of food within contemporary social life including the practices that occur within domestic settings and how these are shaped by wider institutional forces beyond the home.

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Notes

[1] For a similar argument about "laughter beyond humour", see Emmerson (2017) who argues that laughter has affective dimensions that are separate from the humorous moments that precede it.

[2] Space precludes a longer discussion of the voluminous literature on the social significance of humour. For further reading on the three theoretical positions outlined above, see Morreall (2016).

[3] Mary Douglas makes a similar point about the way humour marks a temporary suspension of the social structure, "[b]ut the strength of its attack is entirely restricted by the consensus on which it depends for recognition" (1968: 372).

[4] Ebenezer Obadare has shown how ridicule is used in Nigerian civil society as a tool for subordinate classes to deride the state, expressing vengeance, serving as a coping mechanism or means of escape, and/or as an act of subversion or resistance (2009: 243-4). Obadare identifies the "central motif" of such humour (akin to Macpherson's "background disposition") as popular frustration and cynicism about "the system" of politics and governance in Nigeria (ibid: 255).

[5] The first project was funded by the ERA-Net SUSFOOD programme, the second by the ESRC. Both projects included comparative data (from Denmark, Germany and Sweden in the first case and from Portugal in the second). The examples in this paper are confined to the UK data.

[6] Utilised in the freshness study, these 'tasting events' aimed to capture participants' sensory engagements with food during shared meal experiences.

[7] Angela Meah undertook the fieldwork, prepared the data for analysis and identified potentially relevant examples. She also participated fully in the analysis and interpretation of the data, drawing on her in-depth knowledge of the participants and their household circumstances through her experience of "being there". Peter Jackson led the funding bids, was PI on both projects and wrote the first draft of this paper.

[8] Both projects received ethical approval from the University of Sheffield.

[9] Compare Warde's structural opposition between convenience and care (Warde, 1997) and our critical elaboration of his work (Meah & Jackson, 2017).

[10] The phrase "Here's one I prepared earlier" will be familiar to British readers as a reference to the long-running children's TV show Blue Peter.

[11] See the Kitchen Life study (Wills et al., 2013) for numerous other examples.

[12] See Elspeth Probyn's discussion of how expressions of disgust build boundaries of social inclusion and exclusion (Probyn, 2000). More generally, on the "anatomy of disgust", see Miller (1997) and on visceral methods, see Hayes-Conroy & Hayes Conroy (2008) and Longhurst et al. (2009).

[13] While some important ethical issues are raised in recording participants while they are drunk, Tony gave his consent to use this material after our research with him was complete. He was fully aware of what he had recorded and how it would be used in our research. He has also read an earlier draft of this paper.

[14] Even the briefest utterances can have social and cultural significance as Wiggins' (2002) work on gustatory mmms clearly demonstrates. Such sounds can be appreciative or questioning, expressing agreement or dissent.

[15] For a critical discussion of the idea of "food as lens", see Murcott (2013: 20).

[16] See also Janet Finch's work on "displaying families" (Finch 2007) and related work on the sensory potential of participant-produced video (Muir & Mason, 2012).