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Eating Your Words: Discursive Psychology and the Reconstruction of Eating Practices

SALLY WIGGINS, JONATHAN POTTER,
& AIMEE WILDSMITH
Loughborough University, UK

SALLY WIGGINS has a degree in psychology from the University of Dundee. She is currently carrying out doctoral research at Loughborough University on eating practices and food evaluations.

JONATHAN POTTER is Professor of Discourse Analysis at Loughborough University. His main research interests are in theoretical, metatheoretical and methodological features of discursive psychology. His most recent book is *Representing Reality* (London: Sage, 1996).

AIMEE WILDSMITH has a degree in social psychology from Loughborough University. She is currently carrying out doctoral research on eating and eating disorders.

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ADDRESS. Correspondence should be directed to:
SALLY WIGGINS, Discourse and Rhetoric Group, Department of
Social Sciences, Loughborough University, Loughborough,
Leicestershire, LE11 3TU, UK
[Tel. 01509 228870; Fax 01509 223944; email: S.K.Wiggins@lboro.ac.uk]

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Abstract

Psychological research into eating practices has focused mainly on attitudes and behaviour towards food, and disorders of eating. Using experimental and questionnaire-based designs, these studies place an emphasis on individual consumption and cognitive appraisal, overlooking the interactive context in which food is eaten. The current article examines eating practices in a more naturalistic environment, using mealtime conversations tape-recorded by families at home. The empirical data highlight three issues concerning the discursive construction of eating practices, which raise problems for the existing methodologies. These are: (1) how the nature and evaluation of food are negotiable qualities; (2) the use of participants' physiological states as rhetorical devices; and (3) the variable construction of norms of eating practices. The article thus challenges some key assumptions in the dominant literature and indicates the virtues of an approach to eating practices using interactionally based methodologies.

Keywords

conversation analysis, discourse analysis, discursive psychology, food and eating, methodology, rhetoric

THE FIELD of food and eating research has expanded rapidly in recent decades, particularly in relation to health, and embodied identities (e.g. Hill & Franklin, 1998; Lupton, 1996; Malson, 1998). The vibrancy and variety of such work is due in part to the range of psychological and sociological approaches adopted and the use of established methodologies. In this article, the focus is on the dominant psychological approach, which concentrates on the cognitive and behavioural aspects of an individual's eating behaviour (e.g. Mizes & Christiano, 1995; Rodin, 1990). While this perspective has greatly influenced eating research, it will be argued that the use of individual methodologies has prevented an examination of the interactional nature of eating (though see Ochs, Pontecorvo, & Fasulo, 1996, for developments in this area). By using empirical examples, the current article aims to highlight certain phenomena that appear to be absent in research using experimental methods, and thus illustrate potential problems with current methodologies. It is to be argued that these instances raise issues that are fundamental to research on eating practices.

To begin with, we provide a broad overview of the main topics of eating research and the assumptions embedded within the methodological framework. These topics can be classed as follows: consumption behaviour; attitudes and taste preferences; and the links between eating and body image. Each type of research is typically based on experimental, cognitive or clinical methods, which place an emphasis on individual behaviour (e.g. Bolles, 1990; Rolls & Hetherington, 1990; Wardle, 1995; Williamson, Barker, Bertman, & Gleaves, 1995). We now consider these topics in turn.

Consumption behaviour

This first type of study involves participants consuming foods in a controlled environment and completing rating scales concerning the food and their perception of physiological and cognitive states (e.g. Rodin, 1990; Wardle & Beales, 1988). This approach is concerned with the means by which food cues are perceived, experienced and cognitively appraised by the individual (see Rodin, 1990, for a brief review). For example, Wardle and Beales (1988) tested the effect of eating a 'preload' amount of food on

the subsequent eating behaviour of dieters and non-dieters. This type of research suggests that the physiological effects of different foods and the cognitive appraisal of eating behaviours are primary concerns of the research. For example, participants may be asked to taste a food and then indicate on a rating scale the extent to which they feel full, or satiated (e.g. Rolls & Hetherington, 1990). Measures such as these may then be used to give an indication of an individual's eating habits, and his or her attitudes toward particular foods (e.g. Rogers & Blundell, 1990).

The implicit assumptions within this type of research can be summarized as follows:

- Physiological states are accessible through quantifiable, external measures
- Each measurement is taken to be an accurate representation of an internal state
- Participant responses are treated as being related to, and therefore predictors of, actual eating behaviours.

Attitudes and taste preferences

Similar assumptions are present in studies that seek to assess attitudes or preferences that people may have towards foods (e.g. Clarke & Palmer, 1983; Ogden & Thomas, 1999). The aim of this type of research is often to educate people into 'healthier' eating habits, or to determine why people have particular attitudes towards different foods (Nash, 1990; Rogers & Blundell, 1990). Methods used for this type of research typically draw on questionnaire or rating-scale designs, in which food tasting may or may not be a component. For example, Ogden and Chanana (1998) used questionnaires to determine the relationship between ethnicity and weight concern, with respect to beliefs about food and eating. The assumptions implicit within attitude research are therefore that:

- Individuals possess a fixed attitude towards food/eating, based on an internal, cognitive state
- Use of appropriate methods will provide access to such attitudes, and to participants' 'true', underlying beliefs
- Attitudes are the result of individual appraisal, preferences and motivations.

Eating and body image

The third main topic of eating research is based on the individual's perception of his or her body image, and the links that this may have with eating behaviour and its disorders (e.g. Heatherton, Herman, Polivy, King, & McGree, 1988; Mizes & Christiano, 1995). For example, Hill and Franklin (1998) used rating scales and body image diagrams to determine the dieting beliefs and behaviours of daughters and their mothers, and the transmission of food values. Studies of this kind typically categorize participants as 'dieters' or 'non-dieters', in an attempt to examine the processes of 'restraint' that are thought to pervade dieters' lifestyles (e.g. Kennett & Nisbet, 1998; Stunkard & Messick, 1985; Wardle & Beales, 1988).

The measurement of eating attitudes is often based on participants' questionnaire responses, and the distinction made between 'restrained' and 'unrestrained' eaters is predominantly defined as being the midpoint of the response distribution (Herman & Polivy, 1980). Use is made of pictorial body image diagrams, in order to determine participants' perception of their appearance (e.g. Monteath & McCabe, 1997). This type of research therefore assumes that:

- Eating behaviour can be characterized as 'restrained' or 'unrestrained' using appropriate measures
- Participants' body image is based on perceptual and cognitive processes, and these can be represented pictorially
- Participant responses are representative of internal states and are independent of other individuals.

The common assumptions of the three types of eating research can be summarized as follows: eating behaviour is treated as an individual activity involving perceptual and cognitive appraisals which directly influence eating styles; quantifiable measurements can be used to access internal states and thus predict eating behaviour; and participant responses are truthful and representative of internal states.

Having outlined briefly some of the assumptions of existing research on eating, we will now consider an alternative approach to eating practices. The current article examines the interactional nature of eating practices in everyday

contexts. So rather than looking at individual consumption, the emphasis is on studying eating practices as they occur in the context of social interaction. This has involved the collection of empirical data from more 'naturalistic' environments, in the form of mealtime conversations. A discursive, social constructionist approach is adopted (e.g. Billig, 1987; Edwards, 1997; Edwards & Potter, 1993; Potter, 1996; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). The aim is to examine the constructive nature of discourses concerned with food and eating, and the ways in which these are used to build identities in interaction. An examination of the data highlighted certain phenomena, which receive little emphasis in the current literature. It is worth repeating at this stage that the emphasis here is on using these instances simply to question dominant assumptions. They can be broken down into three themes, each of which is concerned with the construction of an aspect of eating:

1. The object of eating; the food itself. How can the nature of food be flexibly built up and transformed?
2. The participants' physiology (e.g. state of hunger). How can this be constructed and rhetorically deployed in interaction?
3. The practice of eating, and the notion of 'restraint'. How can restraint (or lack of restraint) be manufactured in sequences of interaction in ways which account for, and justify, different activities?

Method

Materials and participants

Tape-recorded conversations from family mealtimes were used as the data for this study. Three families were recruited via non-academic personal contacts to record the conversations themselves using a portable tape-recorder. Recording was carried out over a seven-day period for each family, in order for the participants to become acclimatized to the equipment. The full corpus is over 15 hours of recorded conversation.

Families with adolescent daughters were chosen to allow for easier access to 'eating' talk, as adolescence was deemed to be a period when socialization into food and eating habits often occurs (see Davies & Furnham, 1986; Ochs, Pontecorvo, & Fasulo, 1996). Additionally,

female adolescents are often the focus of concerns about eating and dietary behaviour (Grogan & Wainwright, 1996; Hill & Franklin, 1998), so it seemed appropriate to consider daughters in particular.

The tapes were all transcribed to a 'first pass' level that captured the words used and some basic features of the delivery of talk. Passages of interaction that involved talk about food, and negotiations of what to eat or not to eat, were transcribed more fully using the scheme developed by Gail Jefferson (see Appendix for transcription notation).

Analytic procedure

The analytic approach is derived from discursive psychology and conversation analysis (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998; Potter, 1997, 1998). The data corpus was examined with a concern for the constructive and action-orientated nature of the participants' talk; how the participants themselves made sense of, and orientated towards, each other's utterances. Notes were made during the transcription process, and during further readings of transcript and listenings to the tape. Of particular interest were points where the material seemed to depart from assumptions about eating in the standard literature. These points were discussed between the authors and in data sessions with researchers working on other materials. Three issues were raised that highlighted potential limitations with previous research. For this article a small number of extracts were selected from the larger corpus of data, on the basis that they illustrated these limitations. Extracts from one family were chosen to simplify the exposition.

Analysis and discussion

We will examine three issues in detail: (1) construction of the object; (2) construction of the individual; and (3) construction of the behaviour. Each issue relates to the discursive construction of eating practices within interaction.

Issue 1: Constructing the object—food

Sociological literature on food and eating has highlighted the importance of the structure of mealtimes and the interactional meanings

associated with food on such occasions (e.g. Douglas & Nicod, 1974; Goode, Curtis, & Theophano, 1984; Otnes, 1991). In relation to this, our first data example is taken from near the end of a family mealtime, in which Sue, the mother, begins to clear away the dinner plates. Also present are her two daughters, Chloe and Emily, who are in their early teenage years. The extract begins immediately following a conversation about decorating the house.

Extract 1: SKW/A1a/M1

- 1 Sue: >Come on< there was only a
↑tiny bit of (.)of
- 2 ↓salmon just ↑ea:t salmon
- 3 Chloe: ↑N:o its fo:ul
- 4 (2.0)
- 5 Emily: I've eaten ↑mine
- 6 Sue: Ye:ah ↑you've eaten ↓yours
- 7 (1.0)
- 8 Chloe: I've been try:ing but (mine's
inedible)

The first point highlighted by this fragment of conversation is that the family members here are not abstractly consuming foods as individuals—their mealtime is an interactive event, where there is a strong sense of involvement with each other's actions. Similarly, there are related activities taking place within the talk, such as urging, offering, and negotiating consumption. Such activities are a part of everyday conversation and interaction (Edwards, 1997) and in this instance they become bound up with the practice of eating. For example, Chloe's mother encourages her to eat the salmon (lines 1–2), which Chloe resists by stating that the salmon is 'fo:ul' (line 3). Constructing the food in this way—as being unpleasant—allows Chloe to provide an account for why she is not eating her food. Eating, or not eating, is seen here as something for which Chloe is being held accountable.

So, not only are there negotiations within the interaction, but these are also bound up with the construction of the food. In giving reasons for eating or not eating the food, its nature is simultaneously constructed and evaluated. One way in which descriptions can be evaluative is to offer a particular representation of the object at

the expense of all others; i.e. they implicitly argue against other (potential) descriptions (Billig, 1987; Potter, 1996). Therefore, it is not only the act of eating that is being negotiated, but also the nature of the food *itself*. How one describes the food is related to how the food will then be treated, for example, whether it will be classed as something that one should, or could, eat.

Negotiating about the nature of food is thus a continuous process, requiring the joint efforts of the individuals involved. Each turn of talk can serve to give a new definition, and therefore construction, of the food or activity. In Extract 1, for example, Emily's utterance 'I've eaten ↑mine' (line 5), contrasts with Chloe's construction ('its fo:ul'; line 3), through its sequential position in the conversation. By stating that *she* was able to eat the food, Emily's talk redefines it as being edible. We can confirm this interpretation of the interaction by looking at the next turn in the conversation, in which Sue repeats Emily's statement as if suggesting that it supported her argument (line 6). This orientation demonstrates that it was treated as a reconstruction of the food as edible, rather than foul; hence the 'problem' lies with Chloe, and not the food.

A further example of the construction of food can be seen in the next extract of conversation below. This section is taken from near the start of a family mealtime, and involves a brief exchange between the father, Mark, and his daughter Chloe. It follows a lull in the conversation, before Chloe makes a comment about the meal itself.

Extract 2: SKW/A1a/M2

- 1 *Chloe:* There's >↑so much< tu:na in Mum
(1.0)
- 2
- 3 *Mark:* It's ↑ni:ce (0.4) it's—it's: tu:na pasta (0.4)
that's why there's so much tu:na >in it<
(4.0)
- 4
- 5
- 6 *Chloe:* °It's° <tu:na with pasta (0.2) not pasta with
tu:na>
- 7

This extract differs from the first in that there is

no direct negotiation about eating the food, but rather a negotiation over how the food may be defined. By using different expressions and emphases in their talk, the speakers are able to construct the food in quite different ways. This simple, yet powerful, use of discourse demonstrates how evaluations may be made about food through what seem to be merely observational comments. For example, by stating that: 'There's >↑so much< tu:na in Mum' (line 1), Chloe not only presents a description of the food, she also displays an orientation to it in a particular way; in this context 'so much' is hearable as 'too much'. By looking now at the other speaker, Mark, we can see how he constructs the food differently, and simultaneously offers a more positive evaluation. In other words, the meal is defined as being 'nice' (line 3), and as containing a lot of tuna for a good reason (i.e. it's a tuna dish). Describing the food as being either 'tuna with pasta', or 'pasta with tuna' (lines 6 and 7) sets up a particular evaluative construction of the food.

We have seen, therefore, that food (as any other object) can be negotiated, defined and constructed in talk, and that this is an ongoing, jointly achieved process. In contrast, previous studies have tended to treat food as an object to be individually appraised, and responded to—through eating it, or not eating it. However, if constructions of food may be variable, and produced in interaction, this raises problems with the assumptions highlighted earlier. Using an experimental methodology, which requires participants to give a unitary response on a particular variable (e.g. niceness), places constraints on the way in which the food may be constructed. What has been overlooked is the fluidity and scope of food construction. Predefining the nature of food restricts this practice, and alters the meaning of both the food and its consumption.

Issue 2: Constructing the individual—physiology

Let us now consider what psychologists would typically conceptualize as the physiological dimensions of eating; that is, phenomena such as hunger, satiety and taste. Our focus, again, is with the way these things are constructed in talk.

The following fragment of conversation is taken from another mealtime, about halfway

through the meal. Mark, the father, is clearing away the dinner plates, when the conversation turns to the food left on his daughter's (Chloe's) plate. Also present are Emily, the other daughter, and their mother, Sue (who does not speak in this extract).

Extract 3: SKW/A2a/M5

- 1 *Mark:* ↑Wh:y ↓don't you want this
Chlo↑e?
- 2 (1.2)
- 3 *Chloe:* °I'm ↑fu:ll°
- 4 (2.0)
- 5 *Mark:* ↑Why are you always full you
↓two
- 6 (2.4)
- 7 *Mark:* I ca:n't underst:and at↓your
a[ge(.)]I
- 8 *Emily:* [na—]
- 9 *Mark:* used to be eat↓ing,
- 10 *Emily:* Haven't got very big ↑appetites=
- 11 *Chloe:* =E—↑Emmie's no:t (.) tha:t
(0.8)
- 12 ↓full all the time but my=
- 13 *Mark:* =But you keep ea:ting things in
- 14 be[twe:e]n ↑meals
- 15 *Chloe:* [Look]
- 16 *Chloe:* ↓Mum (.) can you tell him my
appe↓tites
- 17 gone
- 18 (2.4)
- 19 *Emily:* °You've just said it°
- 20 (1.8)
- 21 *Chloe:* >No but< she's been ↓here so
she can
- 22 ↑pro:ve it

As before, this extract illustrates an account of food which is jointly produced. In this case, the conversation is concerned with Chloe's physiological state—how full she feels. Simply stating that she is full (line 3) is not, on this occasion at

least, treated as adequate as a reason for her failing to eat all of her meal. Upon being questioned by her father, Chloe then goes on to produce a more elaborate account of her internal state using references to appetite and the presence of others to achieve this.

Reporting one's physiological state can therefore involve more than describing internal sensations, which is the assumption in many psychological studies (e.g. Birch, 1990; Rogers & Blundell, 1990). Here we have seen an instance where some further formulation is required, and in particular some report of evidence, in order for the report to be treated as an acceptable account. In this respect, physiological states are treated as negotiable. For example, Mark (line 5) starts to treat his daughters' fullness as a move in an argument. Yet an internal sensation, such as fullness or taste preference, is generally regarded in current research as something purely individual. What is being suggested here is that in practical situations such 'states' can be open to public discussion; that is, they can be negotiated, disputed and argued for or against. Descriptions of one's physiological state, then, are not simply descriptions, but resources within interaction, available to all participants. Physiological accounts can be used to answer questions, requests, or to justify behaviour; to treat them as merely representational would be to underestimate their orientation to action.

Let us illustrate this by contrasting the way a physiological state can be constructed in a conversation with how it is defined in a consumption questionnaire. For example, constructing 'hunger', or 'satiety', as unitary physiological states in experimental terms may underestimate the variety of ways in which these sensations can be evoked in everyday discourse (see Lupton, 1996, p. 33). Talking about being 'full', in Extract 3, provided Chloe with an account or justification for a particular course of action (i.e. not eating all of her food). The use of questionnaires and rating scales may obscure the flexibility around the meanings of physiological accounts. Using an approach which can deal systematically with natural discourse is one way to reveal these flexible constructions.

Our next example takes another 'physiological state'—taste—and shows how it is variably constructed in interaction. Extract 4, below, is taken from near the end of a family mealtime,

with the same family members as in the previous examples. Once again, as the plates are cleared away, attention turns to what has, or has not, been eaten by the daughters.

Extract 4: SKWA1b/M4

- 1 *Emily*: I've ↑only left the vegeta↓bl:es
 2 *Mark*: °Well° I want you to eat the
 ↑vegetables:
 3 that's the who↓le point
 4 *Chloe*: [mmrrrr↓gghhhhhh
 5 (1.2)
 6 *Mark*: [(have a bit of chicken)
 7 *Sue*: [↑The[y were n:ice vegetable::s]
 8 *Emily*: [<Com:e ↓on Chl::oe>=
 9 *Mark*: =They're ↑lovely they ↓were (.)
 they were
 10 co:oked in the ↑wok (.) they
 weren't b:oiled
 11 or anything like ↓that

This section of conversation provides an illustration of how taste can be constructed as being an objective quality of food. Mark speaks about the vegetables as being 'n:ice' (line 7) and '↑lovely' (line 9), as if this was how they *really* are, regardless of individual tastes. By depicting them in this way, an argument is produced as to why Emily should be eating them. The 'point' of eating appears to be negotiated in terms of quantity and quality. Emily claims that she has eaten most of her dinner, leaving 'only' the vegetables (therefore emphasizing the quantity eaten). Mark then replies to this by stating that the 'whole point' (line 3) of eating the meal is to eat the vegetables, thus stressing the *type* of food to be eaten (with the emphasis on the quality). The quality of the food is further emphasized in lines 9–11, in which the method of cooking is used by Mark to account for how 'lovely' they were (line 9). This offers the construction that one's sensory experience of the food is dependent on external, rather than internal factors.

What we have tried to show here are the ways in which attitudes and preferences about foods are more complex than is suggested in much current research, and that there is more to

physiological accounts than the representation of individual sensations. The analytic examples discussed here suggest that these apparently fixed states can be used both flexibly and rhetorically in interaction. This sharply contrasts with results found in experimental situations—perhaps because of the presence of others, but more importantly, by the way in which the 'attitude' itself is regarded. Constructing evaluations is an activity that participants accomplish *themselves*—they are not just passively responding to internal, cognitive or physiological states (Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

Issue 3: Constructing the behaviour—refusing food

The final issue is concerned with the way eating practices are categorized as 'normal' or 'restrained' (e.g. Herman & Polivy, 1980). As discussed in the introduction, this is often based on questionnaire responses about behaviour and attitudes towards food, and places constraints on the way in which the behaviour may be defined by the participants themselves. We now consider an extract of conversation in which such an issue arises. This extract was taken from near the start of a family mealtime, in which Sue (the mother) asks Chloe (her daughter) about her day at school.

Extract 5: SKWA1a/M2

- 1 *Sue*: What >did you< have for ↑lunch
 t'day?
 2 (2.0)
 3 *Chloe*: I had a chi:cken pi::e.
 4 (3.0)
 5 *Chloe*: (2 syllables)=
 6 *Mark*: =An' what
 7 *Chloe*: A choc:olate do:ughnut
 ((smiley voice))
 8 *Sue*: I heard [you (.) sha:med
 your↓self.
 9 *Mark*: [For ↑lunch
 10 *Chloe*: ↓No but I ↑didn't have any
 ↓break I came in
 11 and ev'rybody was .hh buying
 like (.) pizzas

- 12 and a—a slice of pi:zza and a (.) a
 13 cho:colate (.) e:r sli::ce for
 break=
 14 *Mark:* =For break=
 15 *Chloe:* =And then [for] lunch they
 have like a (0.2) a—
 16 *Mark:* [A:h]
 17 *Chloe:* a↑nother piece of pizza and a—
 (0.2) an' a(.)
 18 chocolate slice and °↑two
 lunches >in one
 19 day<° I [mea]n (.) even when I
 ↑am (.) li:ke
 20 *Mark:* [mm]
 21 *Chloe:* (0.2) my <pi:ggy self> (0.2)
 don't eat ↑that
 22 mu:ch

As in the other extracts, what we can see here is the production of an account—in this case it is an account of what was eaten by Chloe, and others, at school that day. Through describing the food in a particular way, Chloe is able to construct a definition of what is 'normal' in this situation. For example, in using expressions such as 'everybody' (line 11) and 'they have like' (line 15), she displays such eating practices as being general, frequently occurring activities (see Pomerantz, 1986, and Edwards, 2000, for how such expressions can be used to 'normalize' accounts). The constructive element of talk, then, offers a means of defining both the behaviour of self and of others. This has a rhetorical function in that one can portray a particular version of events in a way that justifies one's actions (Potter, 1996). In the extract above, Chloe is able to account for her own behaviour (eating the doughnut) through comparing her actions to those of others. By producing an account of what is 'normal' she can then construct her own actions as being somewhat restrained in comparison, and thus defend her behaviour against criticism (see Edwards, 1994; Smith, 1978, on the construction of normalizing accounts).

Our final data example further illustrates the rhetorical nature of talk, with respect to the eating habits of others. The following section of

conversation is taken from the middle of a family mealtime, in which Chloe is referring to friends of hers at school. The discussion from which it is taken centres around how much food other people eat, and how this may relate to their body shape.

Extract 6: SKW/A1a/M2

- 1 *Chloe:* <She ↑does (0.6) she does: (0.6)
 she
 2 does eat a lo:t (0.2) but the:n (.) so
 3 does Ja:ne>
 4 *Mark:* Well Jane doesn't—
 5 *Sue:* ↑Jane doesn't ↑d:o anything
 6 *Chloe:* No but—
 7 *Sue:* (Or) play spo:r:t
 8 *Chloe:* I know but Jane ea:ts: a lo:t

In this sequence, an individual's eating habits is defined using a reference to, or comparison with, those of another person. The notion of eating a lot of food (as in lines 1 and 2) is given meaning through being defined as a relative quality. As was indicated earlier, what may be seen as restrained requires a 'normal' level with which to compare it. In this instance, what may be seen as excessive also requires a sense of what is to be expected from others. This is similarly bound up with notions of sport and activity in relation to eating habits. Jane is described as eating a lot, despite being inactive (lines 4–7), suggesting that this is not the 'norm' in this situation. The construction of others' behaviour is hereby defined as being dependent on a comparative source.

The above extract also highlights the issue of accountability in relation to eating habits. As in Extract 5, in which Chloe was held accountable for eating a doughnut, in this latter extract it is Jane whose behaviour is under debate. Her eating habits are being assessed in relation to her physical activity rather than simply her physiological state. This idea of being held accountable for what one eats is an important aspect of interaction, particularly in relation to body image and the 'thin ideal' (Davies & Furnham, 1986; Grogan and Wainwright, 1996). In Zdrodowski's (1996) paper, for example, she noted how the eating behaviour of women classed as

'overweight' was always accounted for in terms of their size. If they ate a lot, they were 'greedy', and so it was no surprise that they were 'fat'. Conversely, though, if they ate only a little, it was because they were on a diet—due to their size. Similarly, Wetherell (1996) found that teenage girls talked about body image and eating in terms of accountability, and that connections were made pervasively between the foods eaten and body size. Rather than being fixed, though, these accounts were variable, and the girls drew on different repertoires as the rhetorical context altered. This latter study also suggests that using a discursive framework may open up new avenues of research in this area.

There is therefore more to the notion of 'restraint', or refusing food, than is suggested by the questionnaire designs typically used in current research. It can be used as a resource in interaction, to account for, justify and explain behaviours—both one's own, and those of others. 'Norms' of eating are often constructed in relation to restricted eating practices, though these are often used retrospectively in accounts rather than existing to predetermine the behaviour (e.g. Herman & Polivy, 1980). As an example of constructing norms, Beach (1996) demonstrated how an individual with bulimia nervosa constructed her behaviour as 'normal' by developing descriptions which invoked social norms and everyday events in particular ways. Malson (1998) also argued this point in her study of the discourses of anorexia nervosa, which highlighted the rhetorical and subjective nature of accounts of eating behaviour. Both of these studies have illustrated the constructive qualities of discourse, and offer an alternative methodology by which to examine eating practices.

In illustrating how eating behaviour can be variably constructed in interaction, we have highlighted some important related issues—those of accountability, justification, and the construction of 'norms' of behaviour. Not only do these show the complexity of accounts, but they also raise questions about the methods and theories used in traditional research on eating behaviour.

Conclusions

In summary, then, we have tried to achieve two things. First, we have introduced a new

approach to eating research, that using data collected from natural situations. Moreover, studying eating as it occurs in everyday life has illustrated how it may be redefined as an interactional practice rather than an individual behaviour. Our analysis is meant to show both the possibility and the potential for studying eating in situ rather than via retrospective accounts or experimental simulations. Second, we have used these data examples to highlight some fundamental issues that are largely absent in the dominant psychological literature on eating and eating disorders.

The three issues were based around the key element of discursive construction in interaction, and on how talk about eating practices is rhetorically and collaboratively formulated. We showed some of the ways in which eating is not simply an abstract, individual activity, but is folded into social interaction and daily routine. Talking about food and eating involves constructing descriptions of food, body shape and activities, which can be used to accomplish a range of tasks (refusing and accepting, accounting for appetite and so on). The current methodology used in consumption research neglects this aspect of eating practices, relying instead mainly on studies of isolated individuals. Our concern is the extent to which such research makes predictions about eating which extrapolate from studies which treat it as a decontextualized, desocialized, individual activity.

It might be argued that work of this kind is focused on questions about how eating is done as a social practice, but has little to say about the more fundamental motivational concerns of traditional eating research. It is certainly the case that discursive psychology is avoiding the factors and effects model that is typical elsewhere in psychology (for some arguments as to why, see Potter & Edwards, in press). However, the attention to people's situated actions is attention to *their* issues of motive and accountability. Our material is threaded through with concerns about why to eat or not. Thus, in a discursive psychological approach to eating 'motivations', 'causes' and 'intentions' become topics for study in themselves (Edwards, 1997; Potter, 1998). This study of the 'why' of eating as a participants' concern may have implications to psychological models of motivation on a theoretical level (for example, highlighting issues to do with

the way taste and hunger can be interactionally negotiated) and on a methodological level (for example, highlighting some of the ways traditional measures constitute their topic).

In conclusion, it is hoped that this brief introduction to a discursive approach to food and eating will open up new avenues of research. We have tried to highlight features of eating that have been disregarded in traditional approaches. We hope that further studies of eating and interaction would start to map out the organization of food-related practices: accepting and refusing food; complimenting and criticizing; linking and separating food from issues of health, body shape and pleasure.

Appendix

Transcription notation

This was based on a Jefferson-style system of transcription (see Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998, for a recent summary), providing the necessary detail required to analyse the conversations:

- (.) A dot in a bracket indicates a pause of less than two-tenths of a second.
- :
- Colons indicate an extension of the preceding vowel sound. The more colons there are, the greater the extent of the stretching.
- (()) Words in double brackets refer to the transcriber's comments on features of the talk.
- .hh A full stop before one or more 'h's indicates a speaker in-breath.
- Salmon Underlining indicates stress or emphasis in the speech.
- (2.0) Numbers in brackets refer to pauses in tenths of a second.
- (mine's) Words in brackets indicate the transcriber's best estimate of unclear speech.
- [] Square brackets indicate the beginning and end of overlapping talk.
- = Equal signs indicate continuous talk between speakers.
- ° Degree signs enclose talk which is lower in volume relative to the surrounding talk.
- ↑↓ Pointed arrows indicate a marked rising or falling in speech intonation.
- >< 'Greater than' and 'less than' signs enclose speech which is noticeably faster than the surrounding talk. When the order is reversed (<>) this indicates slower speech.

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