



Faith in Food: British Narratives about Milk

What makes milk such an interesting topic is the fact that it is not merely a food product; it is also a socio-cultural concept, one around which myths are built. Based on the findings of the micro-study of the social construction of milk in the UK, this article explores how the British take the concept of trusting milk beyond the confinements of the home: milk may be a homely drink, but it is also readily available to drink in both schools, restaurants and cafés.

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The purpose of this article is to show how actors both acquired and constructed meanings about milk, and what factors appear to be the 'organising principles' within such constructions. It will show how the way in which young people in Britain consume milk is intricately connected to both socio-cultural and institutional values, manifested in not only individual perceptions of milk, but also in its selection and usage. By investigating the social construction of milk in the British context, this study complements the other articles in this volume both theoretically and empirically.

As a means of framing the investigation, the reader will be firstly introduced to the background behind it, explaining who the informants were and where they came from, as well as the nature of the field study. Milk will also be discussed in order to show that it is not only a versatile food product, but also a *concept* which is saturated in beliefs. This article will go on to explain how informants formulated their own taxonomy of milk, categorising it in terms of usage. Perceptions of milk will also be examined, as these indicate how the concept of milk has been installed in young peoples' consciousnesses. How children learn about milk from the home naturally follows on from this, and the importance of upbringing in formulating childhood attitudes and behaviour will be considered. Moreover, the way in which the dairy industry has constructed milk as a health 'remedy' will also be looked at, because young people receive this information as it is imparted through institutions such as schools and health clinics, confirming the industry's impact on personal perceptions. We will then look at the type of milk favoured by informants, why they preferred it and how they used milk as a key ingredient in the creation of certain food products. It is interesting to consider the various reasons behind such attitudes, and contributory factors which impact on personal taste such as the power of nostalgia will be briefly observed. The section following this will look at the significance of milk as either a virtuous or a dubious concept, highlighting milk's ambiguity and connecting it simultaneously to both 'good' and 'bad' parenting. The final concluding section will offer a summary of the study findings, and will present the established organising principles behind the social construction of milk in the UK micro-study.

The basics behind the study: when, who and where

Whilst family groups participated in the study, the majority of informants were young people aged be-

tween 13 and 16, and the total number of participants was twenty-three. The fact that informants were all British with different social and ethnic backgrounds was beneficial, because findings indicated that attitudes towards milk consumption were somewhat universal, regardless of "class" or ethnicity variables. Suburbs of west London provided a large ethnic mix of informants, as well as a rich patchwork of various social "classes" and cultures. In total, during the period 18th - 23rd October 2006, four families were visited in their homes for semi-structured interviews. We spoke to a girl, aged 15 and her brother aged 14 together with both parents. The other three participants were all boys aged between 13 and 15, and each with only their mother present. Furthermore, one high school was visited, and two separate classes were taken, with the number of teenage informants here totalling 18.

The research format adopted a simple ethnographic structure, based on a small-scale qualitative approach. Questionnaire-type interview guides were used for both semi-structured family interviews and discussions in the classroom. The home-based family interviews were necessarily semi-formal, but questions were focused and targeted, whereas during the more spontaneous classroom sessions, the form of an open discussion was implemented, whereby the questionnaire schema was utilised mainly as a guideline. Indeed, actively discussing milk with the youngsters in this way gave the added bonus of being able to see how the teenagers reacted non-verbally, in terms of expressions and behaviour in response to questions and comments. Both note-taking and a dictaphone were used as methods for recording data, as both techniques complement each other. The next section will frame the discussion about milk by briefly examining milk as a *concept* and how, because of its conventionality, it might be seen as being rather remarkable.

Milk's exceptional banality

We should appreciate that milk as a concept and not just a food, means different things to different actors. Food as a social concept (Counihan 1997, Koustrup, 2007) is not merely sustenance, but is saturated with a multitude of emotive connotations, such as good or bad health, taste, ethics, exclusivity and quality. When we select what food to eat, our choices tells stories about us as social actors, our values and needs, and how our choices may be structuring the cultural fabric of our surroundings. The very simplicity of these facts makes the study of a product as 'inoffensive' as milk so com-



elling. Unlike other foods which can be typified in gender terms, such as red meat's masculine connotations, and white meat's more feminine associations (Bourdieu 1984, Twigg 1981), milk is somewhat genderless. Milk is used in one form or another in everyday life, and milk usage is not confined to children. Moreover, milk is an aesthetically pure-looking product: if we consider that food choices are sensual choices, and are connected to our sense of taste, smell and what we see, so fresh milk is aesthetically appealing. Milk is a versatile product and ingredient, and whilst its usage may be conventional, it also has the ability to be transformed from a liquid into a solid. In this respect, milk is not just a drink in itself: wine and beer may be culinary ingredients, but their usage as a cooking ingredient is very different to milk's usage in this way. Many standard British dishes are milk-based; indeed, without the addition of milk, certain foods would not exist. Examples are white sauces, pasta dishes, mashed potatoes, pancakes, English custard and rice puddings. These foods can also be coded as being practical family foods, as the addition of milk allows the volume to be stretched, thus making the dishes economical. Milk is not exclusive, sophisticated or risqué: milk is utilitarian and dietetically approved of, which places it in a 'safe' category of foods. It can be surmised that this very 'safeness' makes milk exclusive. This manner of coding food has been explored by Bourdieu (1984) and Douglas (1975), and is highly relevant to the study because it places milk within this safe and 'functional' category. What this means is that milk represents not merely a safe beverage, but also a safe food, which makes it *trustable*.

It is interesting to examine how young people in particular feel about something as ordinary as milk, because this sub-group of society is the consumers and parents of tomorrow. Dairy products constitute a large sector of the food market, and if individual actors do not have a taste for pure milk in particular, they may quite possibly enjoy cheese, butter, cream or yoghurt. Dairy products are also highly represented by organic production methods, connecting the concept of dairy explicitly to animal welfare and food ethics. What teenagers think about food, and how they behave dietetically is not only of consequence to the nation's health in general, but also to the industry, which is why understanding how young actors consume milk is so important. When discussing with informants milk and how it is consumed, it was possible to categorise milk into different products, according to their usage. This was not only essential for the study in general terms, but also indicated quite importantly that milk's usage is explicitly defined, and that not all milk products are considered to be 'milk', even if they are constituted mainly of milk. The next section briefly presents these classifications in more detail, making three areas of distinction.

Informants' own taxonomy of milk products

When informants referred to 'pure milk', they were

generally talking about plain milk, which is consumed alone as a drink. Secondly, milk-based products refer to foods where milk is the main ingredient, such as cereals and milkshakes. Thirdly, milk-supplemented products signify hot drinks, where milk is added, such as coffee and hot chocolate. These categorisations indicate that milk usage is defined according to the *quantity* of milk used: the more milk in a product, the more milk-based it is, but essentially, as soon as something is added to plain milk, it is no longer a 'pure' milk product. In terms of milk's usage, it is worthwhile bearing in mind that in Britain, adding milk to tea and coffee is a cultural norm, rather than an exception, and many individuals acquire their daily milk quota in this way. This suggests that whilst the milk-supplemented products may contain less milk, they provide a significant means of acquiring milk, which otherwise may not be consumed if individuals do not drink plain milk or eat cereal, for example.

These classifications assist in the understanding of what informants meant when discussing milk, and therefore milk in this context must be understood in these terms: informants' conceptions of milk-consumption is *pure milk*, *milk-based* products and drinks which are *milk-supplemented*. Now we have looked at what milk signifies and how informants classified their milk usage, the next section will consider personal perceptions about milk, and how milk maintains its banal and rather innocent attributes.

Safe, not sexy: constructed perceptions about milk

During the field study, it became clear that whilst most informants consumed all three categories of milk products, the few informants who did not like milk in its pure form still consumed products which were either milk-based or milk-supplemented. Narratives about milk were therefore not confined to dialogues about 'pure milk', and those who also consumed milkshakes and hot drinks with milk considered these products to be valid milk-based refreshments which contained the same nutrients for 'good health' as milk in its pure form. When asked what associations they made when thinking about milk, the youngsters' responses were unsurprising. Typical responses were: natural, calcium, healthy teeth and bones, babies, breakfasts, good health, grazing cows, nature and green grass. On being questioned as to whether they had any negative thoughts about milk, the teenagers mentioned rancid milk, warm milk, the skin which forms on hot milk and even goat's milk. Milk is temperature-critical, and from being a pure and appealing product, it can be quite easily transformed into a revolting one. The only slightly sensual connotation made to milk was that concerning Cleopatra bathing naked in ass's milk, but otherwise milk was considered to be decidedly un-sexy. One teenager also said that he had been taught that milk helps to stop diarrhoea, which was a 'truth' he had learned from his parents at home.

The findings indicated that the reasons behind many



beliefs about milk are the result of the way in which meanings are culturally installed within actors' own system of beliefs, via their individual social systems. The study confirmed that children make verbal repetitions about milk, through their narratives, and when asked where they had learned about milk, they often stated: "from home". When the teenagers were asked *why* they believed milk to be healthy for them, the customary answer was that they had learned from their parents - especially mothers - that calcium was good for healthy growth and strong teeth and bones. The home aspect recurred naturally in the investigation, and is undoubtedly a key organising principle in the manner in which milk is socially constructed. To this end, the concept of how beliefs about milk are generated from both within the home and via external institutions will be looked at in the next section.

Home stories

Parental relationships are evidently intricately bound up with the attitudes children possess about food, as well as their behaviour (Charles & Kerr 1988, Koustrup 2007). In this way, the importance of inherited dietary values and their impact on the way in which actors interpret the dietetic discourse cannot be underestimated. Teenagers talked not only about what they had learned about milk, but how they had been accustomed to consume milk in particular ways, during daily rituals. For example, one youngster explained that it was a routine for him to have a milk-based hot chocolate drink together with cereal and milk every morning for breakfast, and in the evening he always consumed a glass of milk with his dinner. In this way, both breakfast and dinner were associated with milk consumption for him, so both the dining occasion, the meal itself and the time are indicative of milk consumption, and can therefore be coded this way. If foods connote situations (Barthes, 1961) then milk does so in this context. The social situation (meal-time) itself connotes milk-drinking, and as milk is indicative of breakfast, breakfast conversely symbolises milk for many of the informants. This example demonstrates how milk habits can be installed via dietary rituals separated by meal codes and time parameters. The ritual food association made with milk can also be seen as an organising principle in way milk is socially constructed: milk products are indicative of their situational usage.

According to the data, milk has generally been constructed in both familial and institutional terms as being 'good' and 'healthy', and when conversing about milk, children are merely repeating what they have learned to be 'truths'. If we consider that both the institutional and social discourses about milk become 'naturally' interpreted and internalised by social actors, we should then consider the manner in which actors are *pre-disposed* to recognise and act on the messages they receive about milk. This system of pre-disposition, the way in which actors have tendencies to believe certain things, is what Bourdieu refers to as *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977). *Habitus* represents inherited knowledge and

attitudes which have been socially passed on, such as from parents to children, or via institutions such as schools. *Habitus* assists actors in their interpretation of new knowledge and situations, it represents competences and the manner in which actors are pre-disposed to think and act, and as such, is reproduced through the social system. To give a relevant example, one mother talked about how she herself had been brought up to believe that milk was vital for good health, and she had never questioned milk's healthy status. She was consciously passing on the knowledge she had learned about milk to her own children, because this was her pre-disposition, and in passing on this knowledge, she was performing the role of the good parent. Her son, aged 15, admitted that most of his milk was consumed in cereals or as milkshakes, but this did not matter, because milk-based products are "*still milk*", and what was important was that he was getting his daily quota. Coupled with the concept of milk's ritual usage, the concept of *habitus* and the manner in which beliefs are passed on can thus also be referred to as a key organising principle in the social construction of perceptions and meanings about milk.

Milk knowledge is not imparted solely by parents, however. Milk producers also communicate their own discourses about milk through the products they sell (labelling) and therefore also through public institutions (such as schools, which endorse 'school milk'.) Whether or not the information imparted by the industry is consciously or subliminally received by individuals is not an issue, because messages about milk are established and, to a large extent, taken for granted to be 'truths'. The industry therefore also has a major impact on constructing individual beliefs about milk, and this will be looked at in some more detail in the next section.

Industrial stories

Knowledge about milk learned through social interaction via discourses and practices in the familial context is not necessarily the same kind of knowledge imparted by the industry, via public institutions like schools. For example, some industrial narratives construct meanings about milk by taking their point of departure not only in good health, but also in matters of ill health. For example, the UK Dairy Council (www.milk.co.uk) market milk as a *preventative* measure against osteoporosis. Moreover, milk is scientifically constructed as a dietary means of reducing both high blood pressure and high cholesterol, as well as helping to prevent certain cancers. In this way, the industry itself is creating their own 'norms' and 'truths' about milk, which form part of the system of institutional milk narratives, and such messages are subliminally placed in actors' minds, which therefore normalises attitudes towards milk. One may say that in this way the industry is encouraging milk sales through scare-mongering tactics, because milk consumption becomes a preventative action. This hypothesis confirms that such industrial narratives are not unimpeachable: Nestle points out that whilst actors



may believe they make autonomous decisions in life, they are in fact acting in accordance with pre-ordained conventions such as dietary discourses (Nestle, 2003). Industrial claims about milk which are endorsed by public institutions such as health authorities and schools filter through in a top-down mechanism to individuals who then act on these messages through their food consumption behaviour. In this more cynical perspective, institutions can be seen to be pandering either directly or indirectly to the food industry's own political agenda. Regardless of which way one perceives this situation, however, people are unquestionably irrational actors with inconsistent dietary patterns; therefore there will always be a whole host of catalysts behind individual actions.

The UK has a history of providing school milk to pupils, and with the EU-sponsored school milk scheme in action today, milk provided in schools is not expensive. The provision of milk in the school, connected as it is to 'good health' and so on, takes the responsibility for care out of the home and social environment. What school milk does in effect is to link 'healthy eating' and 'good health' to external institutions and regardless of parents' attitudes towards milk, schools endorse the governmental and industrial discourse about milk. In this respect, industrial and institutional narratives are inescapable and therefore serve to normalise milk's place in the British diet as a 'valid' health food. Therefore, the industrial and institutional perspective on milk may also be considered to be an organising principle in the social construction of milk, and one which is unavoidable.

The trust which informants quite freely demonstrated in the focus group sessions can also be connected to the issue of milk's provenance and therefore, its traceability. Supermarket brand milk in the UK is usually labelled "British" and "farm assured", and could be construed as the industry's way of attempting to secure consumer trust. Whilst the traceability of milk was not discussed greatly with informants, milk's geographical derivation was not questioned, as it was taken for granted that milk was British, and in being home-produced, was supposed to be trustable. This accepted knowledge, together with the dominant nutritional discourse concerning dairy products, combine to formulate established positive meanings about milk, and this is what can be termed as the dominant *doxa* (Bourdieu, 1977). *Doxa* refers to concepts and practices which are normalised and thus taken for granted, and consequently reproduced within the social field through social interaction. An example might be when informants said: "*Milk is good for strong bones and teeth*": this recurring narrative serves to confirm the conventional belief that milk is good, because its health properties are taken for granted. Milk has been socially and culturally constructed as a 'good' and 'healthy' food product, and this conceptualisation forms the prevailing *doxa*. In questioning milk's nutritional worth, it can be said that one is challenging the dominant *doxa*, and

this situation was encountered only once in the field study, and will be mentioned later on in the section titled "*Milk evil*".

Therefore, we can see that both the industry and the institutions are implicitly connected to the way in which milk is perceived by actors and consumed. The industrial messages, as component parts of a system of beliefs about milk, can also be seen as a key organising principle in the social construction of milk, and when schools both endorse and supply milk, such messages are being constantly re-affirmed. Now we have considered milk as a concept, individual perceptions of milk and how both the home and external institutions assist in building 'knowledge' about milk, it becomes clearer how milk is socially constructed. The next section will examine what kind of milk informants preferred to drink, and what factors are behind taste preferences. For example, are youngsters concerned about the fat content, as they are in Denmark (Explora 2006)? And is it unthinkable for young people to drink milk outside the home environment as it appeared to be in many other countries involved in the study? Factors relating to milk's nostalgic associations also serve to solidify meanings about milk, and these reflections were made by parents. The following section will consider all of these aspects as organising principles.

What kind of milk, and why is it so enjoyable?

According to the teenagers we talked to, skimmed milk is disgusting, tasteless and thin. One youngster likened skimmed milk to "*cat's pee*" and another said it was like drinking water. Semi-skimmed milk, and occasionally whole milk, was the conventional milk for all the teenagers interviewed. Milk had to be tasty, which meant it could not be skimmed, nor could it be warm. Comments about milk's taste included its texture, colour and temperature, and a glass of ice-cold semi-skimmed milk was the favoured choice for pure milk amongst the pupils. Furthermore, there was no mention of fat content, and in fact teenage girls in particular expressed no concern about milk's fat percentage, especially as most of them preferred semi-skimmed milk to drink. One teenage girl mentioned that she consumed large amounts of fresh organic cream (poured in hot chocolate, whipped with dessert etc.) whenever she could, simply because she adored the taste. Fat was the least of her concerns! Milk's healthy status rendered its fat content obsolete: taste was more important than fat. When considering the importance of taste over fat content, taste becomes another key organising principle in the social construction of milk amongst teenagers, because it offers another pretext for drinking milk: milk is not consumed merely because it is supposed to be healthy, but because individuals actually *enjoy* it, too.

When asked about school milk, the majority of youngsters stated that they would drink school milk if it was ice cold and free - and in front of each other. In the schools visited, milk was readily available in the breakfast bar and lunchtime canteen. For example, pupils



could buy milk-based cereals like porridge as well as yoghurt drinks and pure milk in cartons for breakfast, and pure milk, milk-based milkshakes and smoothies were available to buy at lunchtime. Whilst teenagers generally expressed that it was more common to offer their friends soft drinks when they were visiting them at home, milk was an acceptable choice if accompanied by cake or cookies. This supports the idea that milk is homely and cosy, and the perfect accompaniment to sweet foods, and both connotes and encodes a social situation. So, what emerges here is the picture of milk being constructed in its pure form as being ideal when ice-cold, especially when at school, and also being constructed as a cosy, homely drink when accompanying sweet foods. Milk is still milk when consumed at the breakfast bar in the form of a milkshake or yoghurt smoothies, and what is most significant here is that no single youngster thought that drinking milk was embarrassing or un-hip: it was normal, conventional and habitual. Milk's banality renders it innocent enough to avoid being labelled as childish and therefore taboo in any way. These perceptions of what makes milk tasty for young people - semi-skimmed and ice-cold - might also be considered to be organising principles in the social construction of milk. Indeed, the data indicated these two key aspects to be somewhat universal amongst informants, when considering the value of milk in its pure form.

Semi-skimmed milk's status as the choice of pure milk for informants is clear, as well as the preference is for ice-cold semi-skimmed milk. But what other factors are at work in socially and culturally constructing an appetising beverage? It has been mentioned in the first section of this article how food is a sensual concept, and that actors' tastes for foods are to an extent governed by their senses. In this respect, the power of nostalgic recollection cannot be discounted. Of the relationship between memory and food's emotive power, Lupton says:

"Given that food is an element of the material world which embodies and organises our relationship with the past in socially significant ways, the relationship between food preferences and memory may be regarded as symbiotic. Memory is embodied, often recalled via the sensations of taste and smell. [...] The taste, smell and texture of food can therefore serve to trigger memories of previous food events and experiences around food, while memory can serve to delimit food preferences and choices based on experience." (Lupton: 1996:32)

Unsurprisingly, nostalgic reminiscences appeared in narratives which came from parents. One parent talked fondly of childhood bed-time hot drinks such as *Ovaltine* and *Horlicks*, which are traditional milk-supplemented malted night-time beverages. Milky drinks both comfort and soothe, and in this way may even be seen to be remedial. Hot cocoa was also mentioned, and this too is a traditional night cap in the UK. In fact, some informants said that hot chocolate *needed* some milk added in order to make it creamy, smooth and delicious: hot water alone did not do the trick. This

conforms milk's status as being an irreplaceable product. Fresh cream is luxurious and milk is not in the same way, but milk offers a less calorific means of creaminess when added to hot drinks - one just needs to consider milk-supplemented cappuccinos and café lattes. When milk is added to these in whisked form, milk becomes converted to a more sophisticated drink which is associated with bars and cafés rather than just the home or bedtime. Moreover, milk consumed in this way is associated not with children, but adults.

One father talked animatedly of his childhood escapades on the milk delivery float, and how he was always allowed to sample some of the fresh, ice-cold whole milk every morning, a memory which he savoured. He went so far as to describe the aesthetic perfection of the milk bottle in the winter frost, and how when the bottle was capped with ice he would love to drink straight from it. Milk is undisputedly sensual when described in this way! As an adult, this same parent said that he did not drink much milk at home except for in cereals and hot drinks, but he sometimes purchased a carton of fresh whole milk at work to have in the office - and it *had* to be full-fat milk, or it would not taste of anything. As with the school environment, drinking milk at work is not going to raise many eyebrows: another parent said that she sometimes indulged herself at work with a carton of fresh semi-skimmed milk as a substitute for orange juice or diet coke, and the very act of drinking the fresh milk made her feel that she was being good to her body. This concept of virtuousness is relevant to all foods which are supposed to be 'healthy', and not least of all milk.

We have already seen how milk has been both socially and institutionally constructed as being 'healthy' and 'good', and how young people have readily adopted these attitudes. Taking the concept further, the following section looks at how milk has also been constructed as something virtuous and 'pure', and considers how milk has the power to alter the significance of a product. Such attributes of milk I choose to term 'milk virtue', and in this way milk can be seen to *signify* goodness, and therefore becomes a symbol in itself.

Milk virtue

As the investigation has revealed, milk is socially constructed in general terms as being 'good', 'healthy' and 'pure'. Milk in its pure form inspires nostalgic sentiments, and with the influx of new and varied milk-based products on to the market, pure milk may gain an even more valuable status. Furthermore, milk is an entirely versatile ingredient and food in itself: milk is transformed with usage, from being homely, remedial and functional, to being sophisticated and adult. And adults drink pure milk without much self-consciousness if they want to, a fact which emphasises milk's conventionality and cultural status in this micro-study. In its very state of banality, milk seems to be the ultimate 'risk-free' food: it is not loaded with meanings about social statuses, and its usage is commonly en-



dorsed by both parents and institutions. In taking these factors into consideration, I would like to point to some findings which illustrate how actors have constructed milk as being virtuous.

When describing some of the 'problems' she was having in trying to increase her son's intake of milk, one parent explained that she actually bought high-sugar, high-fat chocolate flavoured breakfast cereals simply to encourage him to drink milk in the mornings. One particular cereal she bought was called Kellogg's Coco Pops Straws, and the concept with these is that milk is sucked up through the chocolate-flavoured straws and the straws are then eaten afterwards. It might be argued that this cereal is rather a nutritional paradox because per 100g, it contains 34g of sugar, 15g of fat and 2g fibre (source: www.kelloggs.co.uk.) It might also be surmised that one benefit of consuming these chocolate straws is that they offer a pretext for consuming 'healthy' milk. Milk makes this cereal seem virtuous, and there have been many reports in the UK over the years criticising manufacturers for producing breakfast cereals aimed at children, which contain too much sugar, fat and salt.

(<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/2160361.stm>)

The contradiction here is that what may be perceived of as being 'unhealthy' breakfast cereals may be transformed into something nutritionally 'moral' with the addition of pure milk, and what is a 'bad' food becomes a 'good' food. Whilst yoghurt can be used instead of milk with breakfast cereals, amongst the informants interviewed, milk was the staple norm. The same parent who gave her son chocolate straws for breakfast was also most unequivocal in her belief that giving her children milk as part of their daily diet equated to being a good parent. She considered milk to be essential to her children's state of good health, regardless of whether it was consumed in its pure form or otherwise, and in providing milk, she was fulfilling the role of nurturer. In this respect, the actual act of *giving* milk is synonymous with parental care and being responsible. The concept of habitus is apparent here, because parents in this way are actively influencing their children's attitudes and practices, and are therefore perpetuating their own beliefs. The *virtue* of milk is henceforth also a construction: milk's virtue is a consequence of meanings attributed to milk which are not negative, but positive. The next section will look at negative discourses about milk, for example, not only seeing milk as a political commodity, but also as a threat to health, which places it in another food category, that of milk as a dietary *risk*. This is useful in the investigation, because it reinforces the idea that actors are highly inconsistent, and confirms the ineffectiveness in attempting to typify individuals simply by examining their consumption patterns.

Milk evil

This article has indicated how the concept of milk has been both socially and institutionally constructed, and

how in general, most informants believed milk to be both good for health and a symbol of good parenting. This section serves to indicate how milk's place in children's diet can be questioned, and how milk can be constructed as a direct danger to human health. One particular informant believed that milk in its pure form was an unnatural beverage. As a parent, she said that she discouraged her teenage son from drinking pure milk, because other animals did not drink milk after infancy, and individuals were merely being indoctrinated by the state and the industry to value milk. She believed that milk as a commodity was a purely political pretext for generating money for the dairy industry (which echoes Nestle.) This rather contra perspective is an example of how the dominant *doxa* is being challenged. It should also be mentioned, however, that this particular informant's son consumed milkshakes and yoghurts, and therefore milk as a food product was not entirely avoidable to this family. Her son also told me that he would drink milk at school if it was ice-cold and free, which suggests that milk consumption is strongly connected to actual taste for milk, rather than family ideology.

Anti-milk attitudes are not necessarily anti-institutional, because the study findings also revealed that negative beliefs can also be formulated through upbringing. Another parent, whilst not sceptical about milk itself, simply did not encourage her children to drink it because she hated milk. She explained that she had been forced to drink milk as a child, against her wishes, and therefore had developed a revulsion towards it in adult life, even though she did not mind the actual taste. In this respect, she had been socially conditioned to dislike milk, and had passed on this construction to her own children: it was the *concept* of drinking milk she detested, not the milk product itself. Indeed, her two children never consumed milk in its pure form, because they had not been accustomed to it during infancy, because their mother had never prioritised milk in their diet. The teenagers did, however, have quite a substantial intake of milk-based and milk-supplemented products, such as milkshakes and yoghurt smoothies, as well as organic cheese, and if they did drink milk in tea or coffee, it was always semi-skimmed. As with the previously-mentioned example above, whilst pure milk may not be approved of by parents, milk as a main component of other foods appears to be virtually unavoidable.

Milk is also replete with health ambiguities. Discussions about milk and its 'dangers' have been circulating in the UK media for a number of years. Milk is taking the blame for some of the same problems the industry wishes us to believe it can prevent. For example, one article in the *Guardian* newspaper blames milk for a whole host of diseases, including diabetes, and confirms the confusion about milk and its health-giving or health-threatening properties. This condemnation of milk relates it to ill health, as well as the issue of food ethics, highlighting the lack of animal welfare stan-



dards in the dairy industry, for example. (See Guardian article part 1 at:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/weekend/story/0,3605,1104740,00.html> for link to part 2). The concept of milk is inseparable to concepts of food ethics and animal welfare. To further blur matters for the consumer, new reports conversely claim that milk can assist with weight loss, and no longer poses a threat to heart health, as was previously believed.

The few examples offered here serve to show how milk is actually a very potent food concept, both in its physical state and also in terms of the myths and stories surrounding it. Indeed, milk viewed in this way renders it anything other than banal - it seems almost risqué! The final section in this article will sum up the findings of the UK milk study, and make explicit what were found to be the key 'organising principles' in the social construction of milk amongst teenagers and their families.

By way of conclusion

In short, what are the key organising principles behind the social construction of milk in the UK? The findings of the study make it clear that as milk is intricately connected to the home and family, its connection to childhood and nurturing is even closer. But milk consumption is also conventional outside the home: at work, at school and in restaurants. Milk has its place in everyday life: it is a quick source of energy for breakfast, it is soothing in its supplementing form with a bedtime drink and as an ingredient it makes functional meals. In this manner, milk can be coded and assists in the daily structuring of meal rituals. Milk is constructed as being 'healthy' and 'good' by the industry, the institutions and through systems of habitus within the social system, therefore sustaining the dominant doxa concerning milk-drinking. Milk is class-less: social status, income and taste are not obvious variables to consider when analysing *who* drinks milk. Nor does milk provoke strong emotions: teenagers and adults amongst their peers will not be faced with ridicule for consuming pure milk: milk is too banal to be considered un-hip or hip. At the same time, however, the findings show that milk as a concept is highly potent.

If we take some of the organising principles of milk consumption amongst teenagers in the UK, the following factors have been established through the study:

- Milk as a (food) concept is both an institutional and socio-cultural construction, confirming its conventional dietary status.
- Teenagers acquire knowledge and their milk-consumption practices principally from the home, but the institutional discourse about milk and health serves to reinforce what positive attitudes they have gained from home
- Milk consumption is not only a question of nutri-

tion, but *association*, too: milk-based and milk-supplemented products such as hot chocolate drinks and Italian coffees can have child-like and comforting connotations at the same time as they can be adult and sophisticated. In semiotic terms, (Barthes, 1961), milk used in various ways *signifies* situations

- As a socio-cultural construction, milk-drinking amongst teenagers (and adults) in the UK is highly normalised and accepted as a standard custom in various environments
- Milk's usage in daily consumption also serves to seal its position in the dietary pattern of many families: milk's usage is not confined to liquid, but also as a solid, and in this respect, milk is representative of different rituals in the daily structure. Moreover, in structuralist terms (Douglas, 1975), milk can be seen as being both unstructured (as a beverage) and structured (as a food) in its usage
- Perception of *taste* is a key organising principle in milk consumption: semi-skimmed milk is the norm; in this respect, fat content is not an important issue
- Milk in general cannot be substituted: this means that milk's position as a principle ingredient is not challenged.

Murcott reminds us that what we choose to eat is a question of morality, social and familial relationships and codes of conduct (Murcott, 1983.) Milk is an integral aspect of the large and inexhaustible area of the study of food and culture. This micro-study of how milk is socially constructed has led on to a greater understanding of the fact that milk is not 'just milk': milk is ordinary, but at the same time extraordinary, because it is culturally saturated with meanings which can determine its usage. Moreover, milk is both a political and a scientific (health) issue and by not drinking milk, or choosing to distance their children from it, actors are openly challenging the dominant health *doxa* concerning milk. In this respect, milk is highly potent, because beliefs about it and its usage are so embedded in British dietary culture. It might be said that class parameters are dissolving and individuals are defining themselves less in terms of their income and more in accordance with their consumption practices (Warde, 1997: 10) - and not least of all food tastes - and milk is a component part of this aspect of 'identity construction'. The UK study indicated that milk is not simply associated with childhood, milk is not culturally taboo, nor are young women necessarily 'hysterical' about the fat content of milk. And is milk indeed a contributory factor in the nation's growing state of obesity? Of course that is another investigation for another research paper, but it is a compelling question to ask. Certainly, in order to gain a picture of how dietary patterns are changing, and the consequences of these changes on



future health in general, further research is demanded. Indeed, it is only through sociological analysis of *why* actors eat in certain ways that we can hope to understand the increase in lifestyle diseases we are witnessing across Europe today.

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