

# What does it mean to be a 'picky eater'? A qualitative study of food related identities and practices

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## Abstract

Picky eaters are defined as those who consume an inadequate variety of food through rejection of a substantial amount of food stuffs that are both familiar and unfamiliar. Picky eating is a relatively recent theoretical concept and while there is increasing concern within public health over the lack of diversity in some children's diets, adult picky eaters remain an under researched group. This paper reports on the findings of a qualitative study on the routine food choices and practices of 26 families in Sandwell, West Midlands, UK. Photo elicitation and go-along interview data collection methods were used to capture habitual food related behaviours and served to describe the practices of nine individuals who self-identified or were described as picky eaters. A thematic analysis revealed that those with the food related identity of picky eater had very restricted diets and experienced strong emotional and physical reactions to certain foods. For some this could be a distressing and alienating experience that hindered their ability to engage in episodes of social eating. Further research is needed to illuminate the specific practices of adult picky eaters, how this impacts on their lives, and how possible interventions might seek to address the challenges they face.

## Keywords

Picky eaters; Adults; Identity; Food practices.

## Highlights

Adult picky eaters remain an under researched group  
Picky eater identities pose challenges in everyday life  
The social and clinical implications of picky eating require further investigation

## Introduction

The categorisation of eating 'types' is a well-established practice in both Eating Disorder and Social Science research. Classifications such as restrained, unrestrained, picky, healthy and impulsive are used as discrete categories to analyse and compare patterns of food consumption, intake, food choices, responses to cues, and attitudes towards food and eating. These groupings help explain behavioural mechanisms in relation to eating. The label of 'picky eater' also functions as an identity. Social science research has described how individuals ascribe, take-up and perpetuate food related identities. They are expressions of the way people conceptualise their own self-image and rationalise their food behaviours. The concept of food identities can help explain food choice processes and recognise multiple meanings that people bring to and derive from eating (Bisogni et al., 2002).

Picky eaters are defined as those (typically children) who consume an inadequate variety of food through rejection of a substantial amount of foods that are both familiar and unfamiliar. Being a picky eater is also characterised by the rejection of food textures, particular food types, and the flavour and feel of foods (Dovey et al., 2008). In recent years there has been increasing concern within the fields of Public Health and Nutrition over the lack of diversity in some children's diets. In fact, the category Avoidant / Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID) has replaced that of Feeding Disorder of Infancy and Early Childhood in DSM – 5 (from DSM – IV) (Kenney & Walsh, 2013). The revised diagnosis has been expanded to include significant food avoidance and restriction, with or without an associated medical condition (Kenney & Walsh, 2013). In the broader social context, the rise in consumption of 'children's food' has further fuelled scrutiny over restricted diets and the replacing of fruit and vegetables with processed foods (Skafida, 2013). The specific label of picky eating is a relatively recent theoretical development and, as such, there are few studies exploring picky eating and 'pickiness' remains a disparately theorised construct (Dovey et al., 2008). While there is a growing body of literature and research on children's restrictive diets there is almost no work on adult picky eaters. Adults with restrictive eating practices are not well described in the literature and little is understood about their experiences (Marcontell et al., 2003), although this is beginning to receive more attention.

This short paper aims to address this caveat by exploring the lived experiences of those who identified themselves and/or their family members as picky eaters. Food practices can be used to construct and maintain identities, they become part of personal food systems and contribute to consistent narratives that rationalise and explain food and eating practices (Bisogni et al., 2002). Being a picky eater has implications for health. In children, picky eaters have lower dietary variety and diversity scores than non-picky eaters and are less likely to eat vegetables (Nicklaus et al., 2005). As stated, little is known about habits and health implications for adults. This paper will examine what it means to be an adult picky eater by tackling the following two research questions. Firstly, what are the practices and preferences that constitute the identity of picky eater? Second, what are the lived experiences of picky eater identities for adults, and how do these vary?

## **Methods**

### ***Recruitment and sampling***

A qualitative study of food practices, values and related identities was carried out from January to July 2010 in Sandwell, a relatively deprived metropolitan borough in the West Midlands, UK. Participants were recruited from community settings, including libraries, community centres and leisure facilities, with the help of Sandwell Primary Care Trust (PCT) staff acting as gatekeepers. Recruitment continued throughout data collection until data saturation was reached. In total, 26 adult participants (16 women and 10 men) were interviewed in a variety of settings about the food and eating practices of themselves, and members of their household. The sample was as diverse as possible in terms of gender, age and ethnicity. Full ethical approval was sought prior to data collection from Queen Mary (University of London) Research Ethics Committee (QMREC). As part of informed consent it was explained that participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time and that all data would be anonymised. Permission to record interviews was also sought.

Picky eater identities apply to a very specific sub set of the sample. The findings presented here are, therefore, based on the accounts of, or about, 'picky eaters'. Four of the participants self-identified as picky eaters and three described some of their teenage or adult children as picky eaters. In total, the diets and practices of nine picky eaters were described. The four participants who self-identified were all female and aged between 23 and 52 years. The five teenage and adult children who were

identified by their parents as picky eaters consisted of four males and one female aged between 14 and 22 years.

### ***Data collection***

The study used both photo-elicitation methods and go-along interviews in order to capture food practices across different social and physical contexts. Photo-elicitation required participants to photograph everything they ate and drank, where and with whom for a four-day period. The methodology refers to approaches that require participants to take photographs that are then subsequently discussed at interview (Harper, 2002; Oliffe et al., 2008). This exercise generated a participant food photo-diary. The overall aim of was to compile a very detailed 'what, where and who with' snap-shot of individual and household eating habits. These photo diaries were then presented back to participants at subsequent interviews and used to structure discussion about routine food habits, preferences, social context, values and tastes. In order to best accommodate participants, the photo-elicitation interviews were conducted in a variety of venues, sometimes in the community settings in which participants were recruited and also in food establishments. Interviews were often held in cafes and cafeterias, and often food was eaten by both the participant (and their companions) and the researcher during them. This approach prompted some interesting conversations and revelations about food practices. The second data collection task was the go-along interview. The go-along interview is an in-depth qualitative interview that is conducted by a researcher accompanying individual participants on outings in their local environments (Carpiano, 2009), in this case the local food environment. Go-alongs are a combination of observation and interview. They provide direct experience of the natural habitats of informants, and allowed access to their food practices as they unfolded in real time and space (Kusenbach, 2003). This took the form of accompanied food-shopping trips to a variety of grocery stores, and trips to fast food outlets and cafes. Participants were accompanied on a routine food shopping trip of their choice during which topics emerging from the photo elicitation interviews were followed up and participants were asked to explain their food purchasing decisions in context.

### ***Data analysis***

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The NVivo9 software package was used to support a thematic analysis of the whole data set. A thematic analysis necessitates that the researcher identifies themes from the transcripts which describe and exemplify the subjective perceptions and everyday experiences of participants (Nicolson & Anderson, 2003). Thematic analysis, like grounded theory, depends on a process of constant comparative analysis in order to achieve consistency and validity. This process develops ways of understanding human phenomena within the context in which they are experienced, based upon a rigorous interrogation of actions and descriptions across both participants and physical and social contexts (Thorne, 2000). Open coding was first used to identify and categorise specific food practices, physical and social context, and references to food related identities. Selective coding was then used to identify the preferences, values and practices that were used to construct these identities. There were a variety of eating-related identities talked about in the interviews and explored in the analysis. For example, five of the participants had, at some point, been vegetarians, all of whom constituted 'being' a vegetarian in slightly different ways. Three of the participants observed religious dietary practices (one Sikh, one Hindu and one Muslim). In passing, participants often described having a 'sweet tooth' or being a 'snacker' or 'picker'. A range of affective food related identities were also talked about, including being a 'food lover' or an 'easy eater'. However, one particularly striking and detailed identity emerged from participant's descriptions that individuals applied to both themselves and others, that

of 'picky eater'. This identity compelled or rationalised certain behaviours and beliefs and had both positive and negative connotations for participants.

## Results

### *What it means to be a picky eater*

Those participants who self-identified as picky eaters spoke of strong physical and even emotional reactions to foods they rejected. They all described being a 'picky eater' since childhood, despite numerous attempts to try new foods and broaden their diet. It was more than a matter of disliking some foods or being 'picky'. Picky eaters were characterised by numerous, exacting and even severe reactions to certain foods and properties of foods such as texture and smell, methods of cooking, and portion sizes. Typically, fruit and especially vegetables were the foods that provoked strong physical and emotional reactions. Participants spoke of how trying to eat some foods made them feel physically sick. Tracy, a 33 year old teaching assistant who identified herself as a picky eater talks about her strong dislikes in the extract below:

***That's the thing ... because I don't eat salads or many vegetables ... the only vegetables I really like is potatoes and carrots. That's it, so I'm very limited in what I can have and it's just because I just don't like them or textures as well, some textures. Like eggs, put an egg in my mouth I can physically ... eurgh.***

Just talking about eating eggs provoked a physical response from her and she mimicked retching as she said 'I can physically ... eurgh'. All of these participants gave quite vivid accounts about the texture of foods they did not like and their physical reaction to them, often expressing their dislike by making retching noises or holding their hands up to their mouths and throat as they spoke about eating these foods and how it made them feel. Lauren, a 23 year old child care worker who also lived with her parents, spoke of her food dislikes in similar terms, talking of how drinking water could make her feel physically sick if it was not cold enough:

***Lauren: I only drink fizzy or juice.***

*Interviewer: Do you ever drink water?*

***Lauren: No ... it makes me feel sick. I can only ... I can only drink water if it's virtually just come out the freezer and it's not frozen. Ice cold ... and I'll only drink that in the summer and I'll think 'oh, ice cold glass of water' and then I'm like give me the juice, give me the pop.***

For Lauren the temperature of the water was crucial to how palatable it was. However, she went on to explain that this was not the case with soft drinks, or 'pop'. Lauren reported taking a two-litre bottle of cola to bed with her every evening so that she had something to drink if she woke in the night. The temperature of food and drink was also very important to Diane, a 48 year old office manager. In order to illustrate her food practices Diane suggested that her go-along interview be held in a local café, so that the interviewer could observe the difficulties she experienced as a picky eater. During the interview Diane explained that she could only eat cooked food when it was very

hot. As soon as it started to cool it 'turned' her stomach. During the course of the interview she ordered and then ate egg on toast. However, she did not finish this meal because it had gone cold, as she explains below:

***Diane: ... and another thing I do ... I eat fast as well. I eat really fast because I don't like it when it goes cold. This is really strange isn't it? I don't like hot food when it goes cold ... turns me off it.***

*Interviewer: Even toast?*

***Diane: No, not when it goes cold ... turns my stomach ... yeah ... weird ... I'm finished now ... It's got cold and greasy I won't touch it now (as she pushes her plate away).***

Two of Dianne's work colleagues, Maureen and Lesley, also came to the café for the interview. They were quick to elaborate upon Diane's account of being a picky eater and describe how it problematized social interactions

***Maureen: Shall I tell? Her diet is terrible.***

***Diane: She (interviewer) knows it's terrible. I took photos of it ... I always think I fancy having a go but er ... Lesley, what was I like with your pizza?***

***Lesley: 'Eurgh' she went, 'I don't like that. It looks like slop'***

*Interviewer: Have you invited her back for dinner since?*

***Lesley: No (laughs). Well it was the face ... the face she made was ... I can't do it; it's like, like I'd tried to poison her (laughs). I was only trying to feed her.***

***Maureen: Didn't I cook you something you turned your nose up at?***

Diane's identity as a picky eater was more than a personalised and internalised food related identity. It actively affected how she interacted with and was perceived by others. The preferences and dislikes of the participants quoted here were much more complex than a straight forward matter of restricted diet and food choices. Picky eaters seemed to have a strong preference for processed food. The foods most commonly described as unpalatable were fresh fruits and vegetables. Cheese, processed potato products, bread, cereals and pre prepared meals, on the other hand, were constituted as dietary staples. As the extract above demonstrates, this could make feeding picky eaters quite challenging as they had very specific tastes. Collette, a 43 year-old mother of five, talked about the eating habits of her 16 year old son Martin, a picky eater, at length during a go-along interview in a supermarket:

***Collette: Right ... because Martin is a very, very faddy eater. It's getting him to eat, that's half the problem (The participant puts a tin of beans and vegetarian sausages into the trolley). Right, I'm going to buy that specifically***

**for Martin**

*Interviewer: Is he a vegetarian as well?*

**Collette: Yes ... he ... he's a weird case actually because he won't eat meat but he'll eat MacDonald's. He'll eat meat at MacDonald's and he'll eat pepperoni. But if you try and give him anything in the way of meat-meat ... no.**

Collette went on to explain that Martin had a very restricted diet and was, for all intents and purposes, a 'vegetarian' as he was only prepared to eat very little meat, consisting of a limited variety of processed meats. If Collette cooked 'meat-meat' at home he would refuse to eat it. Collette also described how Martin's preference for confectionary, rather than meals, meant that she carefully monitored his weight and diet. As a result of the highly specific and limited dietary practices this identity entailed being a picky eater often meant eating alone or having to have meals modified and substituted in order to engage in social eating practices with family and friends.

### **Picky as an identity: being different**

Participants who described themselves or family members as picky eaters were very much aware of the fact that these eating practices marked them out as different from other people. As can be seen in the previous section the words 'strange' and 'weird' were used to describe them. Picky eaters often positioned themselves as 'other' and opposite to their friends and family. This presented more of a problem for some than others. Participants differed in how they perceived their identity as a picky eater. Diane and Tracy, for example, both expressed a sense of resignation and regret over it, particularly in terms of the social implications. Eating out and even eating with family were complicated by their restricted diet. In the extract that follows Diane talks about the problems being a picky eater caused:

*Interviewer: Does your mum eat the same sort of food as you?*

**Diane: No. She's pretty ... .. I've sort of noticed that she gets in a habit of not bothering cos it's not fair you know. So I do feel I let her down sometimes, but I don't really like that sort of food.**

*Interviewer: .... Where do you think it comes from, how you are with food?*

**Diane: I don't really know. It's just a pattern I've had. Well, I'm 48 now so I'm not going to be able to change am I, really? I'd like to think I could change it but I know as soon as I start eating healthy it just goes back to being what I like and what I fancy. You've got to really look ... you've got to have that craving for something haven't you ... I ain't got it, only for junk ... .. I'm not interested in cooking at all, I hate it. I can't be bothered. That's why I have such a problem I think with food and how I look (laughs) ... I'd rather ... if somebody came, some scientist came up with a pill for breakfast, a pill for**

***dinner, a pill for tea I would quite happily live on three pills a day.***

Diane expressed guilt over the fact that she could not regularly eat with her mother and felt that she had 'let her down'. She also positioned herself as powerless over her food practices and tastes and acknowledged that she thought her diet unhealthy. In fact, concerns over 'healthiness' were common in accounts of picky eaters and their practices. But, as picky eaters explained, they had to 'fancy' eating something or have a craving for it. This impulsivity also extended to erratic eating patterns. Picky eaters often skipped meals and went without food for relatively long periods of time and, at other times, ate large quantities of 'junk' such as confectionary or savoury snacks.

However, not all picky eaters viewed their eating practices as wholly negative. Caroline, a 52 year-old who worked part time as a teaching assistant, explained that she and her two sons were all picky eaters and that this caused considerable difficulties eating out and with social eating in general:

***We went away with some friends and we were a nightmare cos they said 'I've never known a family ... The whole family, cos we went away to America and they said 'I can't believe everything you asked for something had to be taken off or added.'***

Yet, unlike Diane, she felt that she had a very positive relationship with food, as she went on to explain:

***I'm ... I'm constantly ... cos my reading matter is nearly always about food. I'm obsessed with food, I love food ... Well I buy cookery books or magazines, and if I go shopping I do go ... clothes shopping ..... .. Yeah, if I do clothes shopping I will do so much but then I will always end up in the supermarket.***

Diane and Caroline present two contrasting lived experiences of being a picky eater. Diane did not enjoy food or eating and found her eating practices caused her embarrassment and guilt. In contrast, Caroline (quoted above) did not express any such concerns. She described herself as picky, but there were no negative or emotional connotations to this label and she reported enjoying food. Caroline derived a great deal of pleasure from food shopping and cooking and actively embraced the highly specific likes and dislikes of her picky eater sons. Unlike Diane and Tracy, she did not let her identity as a picky eater stop her from eating out or cause her any embarrassment. Lauren was similarly positive about her relationship with food, explaining that being a picky eater allowed her to eat 'whatever I like'.

## **Discussion**

The overall aim of this short paper was to explore the lived experiences and practices of adult picky eaters, a group that remain, as yet, under researched. The concept of picky eaters is a relatively recent one. Increasing concern over restricted diets in young children has led to speculation that, if left unchecked, these dietary practices could lead to a generation of unhealthy nutrient-deficient adults (Dovey et al., 2008; Kauer, 2002). Despite these concerns there is an absence of data on how these practices are carried into adult life and the resulting impact upon health (Kauer, 2002). All of those identified or self-identifying as picky eaters in this study explained that they had been this way

since childhood and had always had very restricted diets. For these participants picky eating did indeed carry over into adult life. This paper goes some way to exploring how this plays out in routine food practices and everyday life.

Food related identities exist in a reciprocally determinant relationship with eating practice, they shape each other (Bisogni et al., 2002). These discursive identities are not necessarily indicative of consistent or uniform or even always rational food practices. Having said that, the accounts of picky eaters given by participants of this study are consistent with depictions of picky eaters in the literature. They all had strong dislikes of certain foods, especially various fruits and vegetables, and preferred bread, cereals and processed potato products. They described very intense or sensitive visceral experiences of food, in that the tastes, texture and aromas of food had intense and sometimes emotional affects (Longhurst et al., 2009), as evidenced by the frequent and animated references to their physical reaction to certain foods.

'Picky' eating is increasingly recognised as a pertinent concern for nutritional health. In recent years, picky eating in adults has received some recognition via online support groups for 'picky eaters' (Kreipe & Palomaki, 2012). Additionally, while Avoidant / Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID) and food neophobia are recognised diagnoses in relation to restricted and selective dietary practices, there remains debate as to whether picky eating can be classified as a specific eating disorder (Jacobi et al., 2008). There have been calls for further research in this area in order to: clarify picky eating as a condition (and possibly an eating disorder); address adult picky eaters as an under researched group; and document the continuity of picky eating from childhood (Wildes et al., 2012). These developments indicate a process of medicalisation around picky eating, an extension of medical authority into evermore spheres of daily life and behaviours and the framing of the issue as a specifically medical one.

Further social science research is needed to widen the debate and specifically to: investigate the social context of these identities, and uncover how they are constituted and embodied. Discursive identities, in relation to food consumption, provide individuals with a way of making sense of and narrating their individual practices. This paper directly examines the ways in which the food related identity of picky eater is constituted and how restrictive dietary practices are experienced, rationalised and incorporated into everyday life. For some, these practices implied a degree of powerlessness, embarrassment and regret. For others the identity was not treated as problematic, did not appear to stop them enjoying cooking and eating and was even perceived as positive. The sense of difference, 'otherness' and embarrassment experienced by some has implications for self-esteem and wellbeing. The identity of picky eater and the inability to fully participate in episodes of social eating could be very distressing. Eating is a very social activity. As social beings food is central to our sense of identity (Fischler, 1988). This paper adds to the literature by highlighting the fact that while the preferences and reactions of picky eaters may be relatively similar, the ways in which they perceived and experienced this identity are quite varied.

### ***Study Limitations***

It should be noted that this study did not involve any clinical diagnoses of disordered eating and there were no questions on disordered eating in the interviews. The data presented here are based on picky eating as an emergent theme. Participants explained the routine food practices of themselves and their families with reference to food-related identities, including that of picky eater. Added to which, given that food related identities were emergent they were not considered in the process of recruitment and sampling. Only nine individuals (four of which were primary participants)

were picky eaters. Additional research on picky eaters as a discrete group is needed to extend knowledge and generate more wide-ranging findings.

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## **Conclusion**

The concept of identity can help elucidate food choice processes and recognise multiple meanings that people bring to and derive from eating (Bisogni et al., 2002). 'Unhealthy' food choices are not simply the product of prejudice or ignorance, they are structured and sustained by a complex array of influences that are mostly social in nature (Gustafsson & Draper, 2009). Public health promotion policies in this area have tended to concentrate almost exclusively on educating people about both the benefits of healthy eating and the links between poor diet and health problems (Sallis & Glanz, 2009). For picky eaters health education alone is not enough. Closer examination of this topic could illuminate the specific practices of adult picky eaters, how this impacts on their lives, and how possible interventions might seek to address the challenges they face.

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