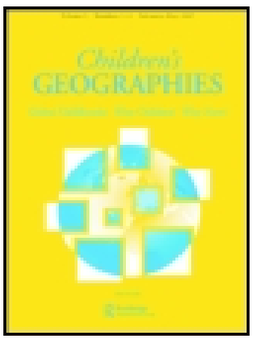
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Sweets are 'my best friend': belonging, bargains and body-shaming in working class girls' food and health relationships

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ABSTRACT

Research and policy on children's food consumption commonly highlights the unequal impact of obesogenic environments on their health. Yet obesogenic theories risk pathologising certain communities, when assuming fixed relationships between 'unhealthy' environments and 'obese' bodies, and neglecting children's multi-layered relationships to food and health. Drawing on participatory photomapping with 11–12-year-old girls in an urban Irish working-class neighbourhood, this study conceptualises children's food environments as dynamic, regulatory assemblages which involve multi-layered 'pushes and pulls' of 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' foods, experiences and norms. Such foods, experiences and norms are related to in a variety of ways in the girls' negotiation of belonging, bargain-hunting and body-shaming. The analysis challenges fixed, binary, adult-centred, classed and gendered ideas about healthy/unhealthy child bodies, foods and environments. We argue that viewing food environments as assemblages invites 'obesogenic' policy and research to inclusively engage children's dynamic and multi-layered capacities to act, feel and desire around food.

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Food environment; childhood; obesogenic; participatory photomapping; assemblage

Introduction

The notion of a ticking obesity 'time bomb' has had significant effects on policy around the globe (Evans 2010). In Ireland, the health and wellbeing of children and young people has become a policy priority under Healthy Ireland, a government-led initiative for which 'preventing child obesity is a particular priority' (Department of Health 2017). Children and young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds are a particular target of policy concern, as they are considered at greater health risk due to poorer diets (Okasha et al. 2003; Layte and McCrory 2011; Keane et al. 2016; Kelly et al. 2019). In turn, the concept of obesogenic environments and associated health inequalities has gained increasing popularity in public health research and policy (Swinburn, Egger, and Raza 1999; Smith and Cummins 2009). The World Health Organisation (WHO) considers obesogenic environments as settings that facilitate the overconsumption of energy dense, nutrient-poor foods and low energy expenditure, i.e. physical inactivity (WHO 2016). Elements considered for potential policy intervention in obesogenic studies include not just school food policies, but also the built environment: greenspace, walkability, supermarket density, unhealthy food outlet relative density, spaces for social interaction and air quality at birth (Wilding et al. 2020). Some studies also emphasise the economic environment, including food taxes, subsidies and food industry policies (Smith and Cummins 2009).

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While policymakers are often unequivocal about the 'problem' of obesogenic environments, several scholars have critiqued the basis on which many claims about obesity have been made (Gard and Wright 2005; Guthman 2011; Share and Share 2017). International studies on the impact of food environments on children's eating practices do not provide conclusive findings. For example, while some studies indicate that fast food and convenience food retailers close to schools are associated with unhealthy dietary practices (He et al. 2012; Macdiarmid et al. 2015; Kelly et al. 2019), others do not present persuasive evidence of this link (Cetateanu and Jones 2014; Keane et al. 2016; Asirvatham et al. 2019). Research on the impact of school environment policies on children's 'dietary behaviour' is also equivocal (Micha et al. 2018). The policy translation of research on obesogenic environments also has the potential to frame localities less as 'environments that make bodies fat', and more as 'environments that make fat bodies problematic' (Colls and Evans 2014, 733). In other words, policymakers tend to use obesogenic studies to problematise children's bodies as not just 'at-risk', but as risky bodies for the nation and humanity (Evans 2010).

The paper examines the food relationships of girls from two 5th class groups (11–12 year-olds) in one DEIS[1] primary school in a socio-economically disadvantaged city neighbourhood in Ireland. Significant research exists on the 'pushes and pulls' that young middle- and working-class girls experience to be both 'innocent' and 'sexy', 'thin' and healthy' on social networking sites and at school (Evans et al. 2008; Ringrose 2010; Renold and Ringrose 2011). In parallel, we focus in this paper on the pushes and pulls of desire experienced by these girls for 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' foods and norms as they navigate their local community, peer belonging, family and schooling. We theorise their food relationships and desires as situated in multi-scalar, open-ended food assemblages. These assemblages reveal relations between the 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' to be multiple, dynamic and context-specific. The elements of the assemblage include the ecology of obesogenic indicators noted earlier, but also prices, spending money, family and school rhythms, shops, employment/futures, advertising and public health messages. Echoing Colls and Evans (2011), we do not pre-determine the girls' food-related desires as good or bad – rather their relationships to food reflect the capacities they develop to negotiate adult-centred, classed and gendered norms. Contradictorily, these norms may pressure them to conform to individualised notions of healthfulness as nutrition or thinness, or create certain spaces for collective belonging. Through participatory photomapping with our participants, we show that the everyday food assemblages they are part of, produce dynamic relations to food and health characterised by belonging, bargains, pleasure and body-shaming (Wright, Burrows, and Rich 2012).

Considering children's relationships to food and health in the broadest sense, we examine not only what foods and food images that industry and school policy make available to children, but also the materialities of un/employment, child culture and family life that industry and policy shape. Thus we also consider the kinds of futures imagined for/by them as adult, worker bodies within consumer capitalism and neo-liberal governance (Evans 2010). Our focus on the micro-politics of these multi-scalar relationships emphasises the complexity and variety with which children embody, and challenge, variously adult-centred, classed and gendered binaries of healthy/problematic bodies and environments. Understanding children's food relationships as multiple, dynamic and multi-scalar rather than localised, and restricted to fixed binaries of healthy/unhealthy environments, can further broaden obesogenic policy and research by offering more space to engaging children's negotiation of belonging, care, recognition, futures and fighting body-shaming in consumer capitalist societies.

Assemblages: mapping children's multiple and dynamic food relationships

Research on obesogenic environments reveals complex ecologies of built, food and cultural contexts, and how these contexts shape health inequalities in context-specific ways. Yet the essentialisation of fixed and causal relationships between various elements of obesogenic contexts has been called into question for its environmental determinism (Guthman 2011; Kirkland 2011; Colls and

Evans 2014). Guthman (2011) cautions against quantitative obesogenic environment studies which draw together factors (e.g. the spatial variation of obesity, and the proximity/density of particular food outlets in certain areas) in causal relationships, when their relations to each other are not always well understood. The essentialisation of certain relationships between limited elements of obesogenic environments paradoxically implies that any person who 'remains thin' amidst an unforgiving food and activity environment 'must have greater disciplinary powers, taste and knowledge' (Guthman 2011, 76). As critical geographies of obesity/fatness contend, this focus reproduces public health moralism, and a stigmatising equation of fatness with disease (Kirkland 2011; Colls and Evans 2014). Meanwhile, ecological factors which are often already well understood – such as the effects of stress on metabolism, unemployment and housing prices – are often under-emphasised in policymaking on obesogenic environments. Partly for these reasons, Colls and Evans (2014) argue for a Critical Geographies of Obesogenic Environments which 'shift the emphasis away from identifying (environmental) factors that make a body fat (and therefore problematic)' towards 'how particular social, cultural, political and economic environments make living as a fat body problematic' (Colls and Evans 2014, 735).

Guthman (2011) argues a fixed and determinist notion of the obesogenic environment ultimately de-emphasises race, class and gender injustices. Such determinism 'reveals unstated preferences for places with the amenities often associated with urbane, privileged environments, including university towns, artsy enclaves, gentrified urban cores, and even older well-heeled suburbs' (Guthman 2011, 86). Idealised leptogenic ('thin') environments are themselves products of particular economic strategies to attract capital, which displace those with fewer resources and further contribute to their disinvestment. Unsurprisingly, attempts to make obesogenic environments leptogenic (e.g. through farmers markets and better parks) can both patronise, and can lead to gentrification. Numerous studies have also identified the typically adult-centric nature of health initiatives. Colls and Evans (2011) demonstrate how responsibility for enabling/enacting 'healthy eating' is passed in a linear way from government, to supermarkets, to parents in ways that define children as ruled by their senses, and incapable of rational, responsible consumption. Yet children and young people are highly aware of – and may subtly resist – reductive moralising about 'healthy' or 'unhealthy' foods and bodies (Evans et al. 2008; Burrows, Wright, and McCormack 2009; Browne et al. 2020; Fernández, Kitching, and Horgan 2021). For example, Goodyear, Kerner, and Quennerstadt (2019) found 13–14-year-olds monitoring their step count and calories burned equated 'health' with 'fitness', reaching a standardised 10,000 daily steps target, burning calories, and in turn, 'not being fat'. But some resisted using the device and its associated quantitative surveillance, to avoid negative feelings associated with not reaching the steps target and/or feeling 'fat'. Some also questioned the idea that such devices have physical education (PE) value and the idea that PE teachers should have access to such partial or misleading quantitative data.

It is in this context of the hyper-regulation of children's bodies that Rich (2010) introduced the notion of an 'obesity assemblage'. This work theorises how a variety of agencies, institutions, bodies and technologies interrelate in the monitoring and collecting of information about weight and health in school contexts. Rich (2010, 807) argues surveillance of young people 'circulates relationally and affectively' without a centralised structure, through networks of agencies including schools, health and social services, and through biometric data collection, which reduces children's bodies to categories of bodily health risk and (in)activity. These ideas push understandings of the regulation of bodies and health beyond binaries of centralised regulation and young people's resistance. Drawing on Malins (2004), Rich (2010) argues such surveillant practices do not present the individual body as good or bad in finite terms. Rather, judgments of good or bad bodies are fluid, relying on the dynamic relations entities in the assemblage (schools, data, agencies) form with each other. Rich (2010, 818) thus calls for exploration of 'how the capacity for embodied resistance may ironically exist in the very same spaces in which surveillance occurs'. She also echoes Malins (2004) call to reduce unethical assemblages and increase ethical, life-enhancing assemblages. We seek to further build on these ideas, to shed light on the rich and multi-layered capacities regarding

food, bodies and health that children develop. Our research responds both to fixed and essentialist ideas about the relationships between elements of obesogenic environments in children's lives, and recognises the fluidity with which regulation of 'good' and 'bad' bodies occurs.

Pushes and pulls: girls' complex negotiation of food and health assemblages

The turn to affect in the social sciences and humanities involves an ontological move 'from essentialism to relationality', and the acknowledgement of 'the capacity of non-human things, organization and even abstract concepts to affect' and be affected by each other (Fox and Alldred 2016, 289, our parentheses). The materialities of children's bodies, ideas, desires, money, and of places such as schools, homes, shops, supermarkets, cafes, takeaways, of people such as families and friends, and of foodstuffs, food production and the employment roles/horizons therein are not pre-given, existing in isolation or reducible to the micro or macro, These materialities all form as relations of an assemblage composing and governing everyday events and settings. Assemblages cohere through certain rhythmic regularities, as a specific 'range of gestures, materials, rules, spaces and other machinic and expressive elements' (Kullman 2015, 265), as seen for example, as our participants move between home meals, school meals, café/fast food franchises, and shop/supermarket visits. Agency is understood here as not located in the child or elements of the obesogenic environment: rather inasmuch as individual agency can be identified, it is premised in capacities for bodies/elements of the assemblage to affect and be affected by others, including through the introduction of new elements and rhythms, which create new assemblages (Gallagher 2019; Kitching 2020).

In this paper, we theorise children's food and health relationships and desires not as the presence or lack of individual tastes or preferences for certain foods or states: rather we think of desire ethico-politically as a set of force-relationships – of pushes and pulls – that enable certain, complex forms of dis/connection and dis/identification with human and non-human Others, which, ethico-politically speaking, enhance their lives or make them more challenging (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Fernández, Kitching, and Horgan 2021). Our reference to 'pushes and pulls' of food desire is inspired by Renold and Ringrose's (2011) analysis of girls' experiences of the consumer capitalist channelling of desire, where their performances of innocence and sexuality have become 'inextricably connected' (Renold and Ringrose 2011, 390). Here, Renold and Ringrose (2011) explore the capacity for girls – as multiplicities constituted through relations with other materialities including social networking sites – to both reproduce often limiting norms and regulations, but also create and experience new forms of desire and connection.

We use these ideas to map how the girls in our study experience complex, sometimes unique food-related desires and capacities, where being 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' are combined, rather than existing as separate and opposed states (e.g. the sweets-best friend relation referenced later). These ideas can help us understand how multiple, contradictory, and classed and gendered desires, e.g. to perform bargain-hunting, domesticity, health, indulgence and body-shaming are drawn together in food assemblages in consumer capitalist societies. Critically, non-human materialities – including food, smell and taste – form part of the assemblage's agency. Non-human materialities such as food can produce significant affects, enticing us towards them and subjectivising us as consumers. But elements of bodies, thoughts, foods and representations can connect in unexpected – and potentially difficult or pleasurable – ways. As Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy (2008) discuss, the taste of a pear tart made in a school cookery class may not be life affirming for those who experience the tart's (or school's) cultural codes as exclusionary. Memory, perception, cognitive thinking and historical experience amongst other elements shape visceral hungers, tastes, sensations and vice versa.

The forthcoming analysis unearths abiding themes in the study of children's experiences of food, class and gender. These include care, comfort, belonging, status, body image, shame, and of course, food quality, accessibility and health inequalities (Pike 2010; Fuster 2014). But none of the assemblages explored below represent wholly good or bad social-material arrangements (Colls and Evans

2011). Rather, children's multiple and varying engagements with food, body and health rules and norms (Punch, McIntosh, and Emond 2010; Goodyear, Kerner, and Quennerstadt 2019) are understood here, as the enhancement of their bodies to act, feel or desire in various, perhaps contradictory, painful and pleasurable ways, and to open up alternative or new, but possibly transitory possibilities for action which could 'disassemble' or problematise fixed and binary ideas of healthy/unhealthy bodies and places (Alldred and Fox 2017; Eßer 2017). An integrated biosocial analysis of the porous and malleable workings and capacities of bodies (Youdell and Lindley 2019) is beyond our scope and expertise here, but we consider the ideas below as lending themselves to further biosocial thinking on children and obesogenic environments.

Methodology

The findings presented here arise from a wellbeing project led by two neighbouring, city-based all-girls' primary and post-primary DEIS schools, in collaboration with the state school inspectorate. In this neighbourhood, international franchises (supermarkets, cafes, fast food) and locally owned convenience stores close to the school are juxtaposed with terraced houses, large open spaces (parks and 'waste' land), and a significant local history of intergenerational disadvantage, unemployment and lower third level education rates. The authors were initially approached to evaluate a holistic wellbeing project designed by the schools as part of the School Excellence Fund. This fund encouraged DEIS schools to use innovative methods to improve outcomes for educationally disadvantaged students. The primary school's work included the implementation of cognitive, emotional and relationship skills programmes, as well as the engagement of a nutritionist to teach about healthy food and food consumption. While the school requested that we use a survey to examine some of the aspects of girls' health (Fernández, Kitching, and Horgan 2021), the data analysed here is from our Participatory Photomapping (PPM) activities, which included walking interviews and photo elicitation focus groups.

In total, 39 girls aged 11–12 participated in the research activities over a 2-year period. Parent consent processes were in place, as well as child debriefing and appropriate checking with the school where any wellbeing concern arose. The girls were predominantly white, working class, settled Irish, with a small number from minority ethnic (Traveller and mixed race) Irish backgrounds. The use of PPM involved two phases: student-led, 1-hour neighbourhood walks and photography to actively engage students in a reflection of food environments in their local area (Phase I, April 2019); and photo elicitation focus groups in order to further discuss the photos taken (Phase II June 2019). The three authors each took subgroups of the girls' classes on student-led walking tours (accompanied by a non-participating school staff member for safety reasons) and for photo elicitation focus groups (unaccompanied by teachers). Our use of PPM as a method owes much to Dennis Jr et al. (2009) model, which argues that everyday knowledge of social places is a mixture of physical, visual and narrative forms of knowledge. Following the PPM model, participants were able to tell us where experiences happen (via walk-along interviews and maps); what experiences look like (via photos that they took while we walked along) and how experiences unfold (via narratives). Taking us out of the school setting some of the time, the PPM method also offered an opportunity for the girls to articulate what food consumption *feels* like in particular places, including the school, locally owned shops, and franchise cafés and supermarkets (O'Neill and Hubbard 2010).

PPM walk conversations and photo elicitation focus groups were transcribed from the audio recordings. Each transcript and accompanying fieldwork notes were read several times. Given the fact that we did not have very frequent engagements with the girls, we could not attribute individual voices on the walking interview transcripts. A thematic analysis, focused on identifying codes in transcripts, fieldnotes and photos, and grouping these under emerging themes was used (Braun and Clarke 2006). The analysis below focuses particularly on the wider relationships of belonging, care, recognition, discrimination, bargain-hunting and body-shaming that emerged in the analysis. The analysis is structured in two overlapping parts, which reflect some of the 'rhythmic regularities'

of food assemblages referred to above (Kullman 2015). In part 1, we examine the girls' experiences of food consumption in the family, school and local retail, and identify their capacities for, and experiences of belonging, care and discrimination. In part 2, we focus further on the girls' desires for bargain-hunting, taste and certain futures as embedded in peer friendships, conflicts and mother-daughter relations.

Home, school and community food rhythms: belonging, care and discrimination

Qualitative studies have argued that children tend to place much greater emphasis on families as the basis for their enduring food practices, with school-based health messages around food viewed as marginal (Fairbrother, Curtis, and Goyder 2016; Maher et al. 2020). Family eating revolves typically around the exchange of love, care and nurturing, which translates, rather than negates, certain public health ideas (Lindsay and Maher 2013). The photo elicitation discussion below exemplified how these girls' food assemblages at home created rhythms and connections, i.e. shared familial capacities and desires for belonging, care, self-restraint and particular tastes.

Q You pick one picture and tell me why you picked that.
A1 … I'm gonna pick milk … 'cause milk is important.
Q … Why?
A2 … I dunno … just for your bones
A3 … I think it's very important because, like my mam gets it nearly every single day because of the babies
Q Because she is pregnant?
A3 No! (laughter) because of like … a baby sister
Q … And do you all have like full milk or semi skimmed milk or?
A2 Full milk.
Q … What's your favourite food?
A2 … Like dinner? … Like, ham.
Q Bacon and ham.
A2 Yeah and cabbage.
A3 … Well for like at home my favourite dinner is spaghetti, lasagne and then my favourite dinner if I was like going out would be Chinese.
Q And do you have takeaway often or?
A3 Every Saturday we get Chinese.
Q Ok so it's like a treat at home.
A3 Yeah.
(Author B Photo Elicitation B 12 June)

Above, we see the pull towards the reproduction of normative relations to food in terms of a healthy rhythm, that guards against the obesogenic environment: healthy foods (cabbage, ham) are nutritious staples, and unhealthy foods are exceptional treats. Milk is considered important for growing up ('your bones' and 'the babies'), and a constituent part of 'my mam's' role. As part of the wider dataset, this excerpt also briefly reflects how young girls can form part of the assembling of adult-centred, classed and gendered food rhythms at home. Food shopping and preparation is an arena of labour where mothers are frequently over-responsibilised, and working-class mothers publicly pathologised as 'failing' to create a healthy balance (Wright, Maher, and Tanner 2015; Cappellini, Harman, and Parsons 2018).

Some girls' relations to 'treats' and 'balance' became more complex in the school context. At school, the assemblage of healthy food rhythms and rules is institutionally timetabled and enforced, and a sense of shared belonging to the space with adults was less apparent for many girls in comparison to family context (Rich 2010; Leahy 2014). Echoing Pike's (2010) study, some of the girls voiced how unappealing the lunches provided to the DEIS school were, and they supplemented them with their own lunches brought from home (Fernández, Kitching, and Horgan 2021). These practices reflect how the complex affective relations of food environments play a critical role in shaping children's food and health desires: the quality and 'feel' of food and eating spaces and opportunities plays an important role in what children consume, where and why (Rawlins

2009; Wills et al. 2018; Fernández, Kitching, and Horgan 2021). The girls below demonstrated how their various relations to sugary foods, cucumber sandwiches and crisps at school reflected various realities such as their lack of freedom to choose, and lack of time to prepare at home.

A1 We all bring in chocolate even though we're not allowed.
Q Really (laughter)?
A2 That's recording!
Q Don't worry … nobody's going to know you said that (i.e. no teacher will know you specifically said that)[2]
A2 … We were talking about it yesterday, that we said that we bring in a load of sweets.
Q Nobody knows … definitely not the teachers, nor the principals nor anybody?
A3 (giggles) She sits there with a bag of crisps!
Q I don't care if you … somebody was telling us she brings biscuits as well …
A1 Yeah, and chocolate spread and all that.
A2 I think you should be allowed like 2 treats.
A1 D'you know we're not allowed frubes, yoghurts … I don't understand why like.
Q Do you think they're healthy or unhealthy?
A1 There *is* sugar in them like, but *still* like, we're allowed Capri Suns, and we're not allowed Frubes.
Q So what do you usually bring for lunch, a sandwich? … your lunch looks really healthy with all the cucumber!
A3 I have my sister's lunch …
A2 I love cucumber, can I have the cucumber?
A3 She has my chocolate spread and I have her cucumber! (giggles)
A2 (Her sister) always brings cucumber.
A3 Yeah I know but I have to have my (cucumber sandwich) lunch, I didn't wake up till half 8 this morning.
Q … And what do you have for lunch? You have like a yoghurt and sandwich, yeah.
A2 … I mostly get pitta bread … with chicken in it and lettuce and mayo.
Q That's healthy, isn't it?
A1 Yeah, they're actually lovely.
Q Yeah.
A2 But then if I don't have that, eh, I eat crisps.
(Author B Photo Elicitation 2A 13 June)

Notably, instead of understanding themselves as necessarily lacking health, these girls negotiated food at school by both aligning with, and symbolically disassembling, normative, nutrition-based notions of what was 'good' for them. The complex pushes and pulls of food desire and notions of the healthy and unhealthy begin to emerge here as the girls negotiate school rules. Some girls desired that certain foods be allowed or approved as 'treats' rather than being effectively banned. Certain foodstuffs (such as yoghurts) are disallowed in schools, not simply because of hidden sugars, but because of other aspects of their materiality: their stickiness, and capacity to stain. As such the girls indirectly drew attention to the fact that school food rules, while emphasising a 'healthy' relationship to food in terms of nutrition, were also concerned with ordering various materialities, including their bodies, the carpets, tables, and uniforms, in a way they might not view as 'good' for them (Pike 2010).

As part of the PPM exercise, all of the groups had the opportunity to visit a locally owned convenience store that was quite popular among them: Mike's. Many visited Mike's shop frequently (sometimes more than once a day) and reported feeling welcome, as everyone knew each other, and were nice to each other. Hanging around outside Mike's sharing sweets, and going for a hot chocolate with friends, were social activities they enjoyed as an expression of their growing sense of autonomy.

Mike's shop is good for like after school, you can just go and get something and then you can just go home. It has healthy stuff and unhealthy stuff and you can get either of those, and unhealthy is the crisps and the Fanta and the chocolate, and the healthy is like the bread and the milk and all the carbohydrate stuff.
(Author C walk, April 4).

Some of the 'healthy' foods we saw in the shop that are referenced above would likely be considered in public health terms as unhealthy ('bread … and all the carbohydrate stuff'). Rather

than position this comment solely or primarily as reflecting a lack of nutritional understanding, we consider it reflective of the power of these food assemblages to prioritise care and belonging over nutrition and self-surveillance (Fernández, Kitching, and Horgan 2021). The positive rapport Mike had with the girls as we visited resonates with Wills, Danesi, and Kapetanaki's (2016) work, which observed that food retailers in lower-income areas value young people as good customers, and build positive relationships with them in ways that may not be evident in more affluent neighbourhoods. But the welcome at Mike's contrasted sharply with the discrimination they often received in local franchise settings, where they are often followed around, told to be quiet and accused unfairly of doing something wrong:

A1 Don't even get me started on (café franchise), oh my God … because the last day they threw us out.
A2 I looove it.
A3 We were only sitting … and we were out in the garage and they kicked us out for no reason.
Q Ok.
A3 Because other girls were messing … we said that we wanted to get some food and he was like 'less of the attitude'. And then we asked to go to the toilet and he wouldn't let us go – that was in the garage (café)
Q Ye still go there but
A3 Yeah they don't like us, they don't want us there like.
(Author C Photo Elicitation B June 12)

This highlights the distinction the girls experienced between food assemblages. Some were part of the fabric of local, intergenerational working-class life, and offered accepting space for the complex negotiation of relationships to food and health. Others were 'in the community' but focused on consumption as primarily an economic exchange. Certainly, it was not a case of either/or (community or profit), as some participants called out retailers such as a locally owned shop we visited that tried to sell them expired food. But this calling out itself arguably reflects the potentially more secure status that the girls had in such locally owned spaces. McKenzie (2012) refers to this value that people find in themselves, families and locality often denied by the rest of society as a form of 'local social capital'.

Consuming relationships: bargains, futures, friends and bullies

Walking through school, supermarkets, shops, cafés and local businesses (e.g. beauty salons) with the girls brought into sharp relief the multiple materialities (e.g. discounted food, heavily advertised foods and ideal bodies, public health messages, available employment), that shape their desire for certain kinds of bodies, tastes and futures that align with, or may challenge classed and gendered norms (Wills et al. 2018). On the one hand, the girls experienced a 'pull' of relative freedom and capacity to buy food in place-specific assemblages of hanging out with their friends and food shopping with their mothers. On the other, this pull was accompanied – to varying degrees – by certain 'pushes' to desire and connect with gendered and classed tastes and futures. These materialities shaped their development as knowledgeable navigators of food desires and food prices. The big supermarket, for example, was very popular when some wanted to get a hot chocolate 'for only one euro' with their friends. Cookies and donuts were 'so cheap … they really are tempting to buy them' (Author B walk, April 4).

Q The bakery [in the supermarket], everybody was talking about the bakery?
A You get huge pretzels for 50c, and cookies for 60c, big cookies.
(Author B Group A, Photo Elicitation June 12)

Mike's shop was also spoken about for its 'good value' and offers, such as 'the €2 bag', inside of which 'you get like popcorn, you get jellies, you get a CapriSun as well' (Author C walk April 5). The girls' resourcefulness was also reflected in the practice of pooling their money to buy big packets of sweets in the supermarket, to be shared between them. But the pull of this consumer 'freedom' – was paradoxically combined with a push to reproduce/identify with gendered practices and futures. First, their intricate knowledge of what was 'cheap' also extended to domestic foods such as

breakfast cereal – a form of knowledge developed with their mothers who did the household food shopping.

Q So do you have any of these (cereals) yourself in the morning?
A1 These ones.
A2 Choco pops … and they're so cheap. They're like 92 cents.
Q You like Weetabix as well?
A2 Yeah, they're so cheap.
(Author B walk, April 4, supermarket)

Second, in a franchise café, we talked not just about 'girlie' pleasures, but also possible futures, in ways that both reiterated classed and gendered norms of women's local employment (e.g. becoming a beautician) but also to some extent challenged them (not working in local catering, becoming a librarian in the city).

A1 I *love* it (here)
Q But you can get this food anywhere, what's different about here?
A1 Because it has like nice donuts and cold drinks and hot drinks and, there's like a mixture of things.
Q Ah yeah. And when you grow up, would you like to be working in a place like this, or hanging out in a place like this?
A1 I don't know? Like I'm going to … like I'm not going to work here. I'm going to be a beautician.
A2: … Me too.
A1 I don't *want* to be, I'm *going* to be (a beautician).
Q Would you like to work here? No? Do you have an idea of where you'd like to work?
A3 I want to be a Librarian.
Q Like in the city library? (Yes). Very good, why that? You obviously love books. Yeah.
Q Do boys … do you see boys coming into (franchise café)?
All Yeah, no.
A1 Well not many boys go in now to be fair like … they don't have any interest in it now, it used to be very famous 'cause it was brand new.
Q … And why do you think girls go there and the boys don't?
A1 Because that's more of a girlie thing.
Q To what?
A1 To go for coffee, chat …
(Author A Walk 2A 5 April)

Third, the girls strongly experienced the 'pull' of food tastes that both reflected and contributed to gendered relations. In contemporary western societies, sweet foods are predominantly linked with women (Mintz 1986). Barthel (1989) discusses how those designated 'chocaholics' are overwhelmingly female, and how a taste for something sweet has been labelled as a feminine desire. Fahim (2012) also examines how advertising depicts chocolate consumption as a natural expression of femininity (and below, caring labour).

A1 I'm obsessed with chocolate.
Q You're obsessed with chocolate?
A1 Yeah.
A2 I'm a chocaholic … (Author B)? I'm a chocaholic.
A1 Yesterday, my mum got 20 Easter eggs to save up for Easter because she always gets one for all the bunch (cousins).
(Author B walk April 4)

As we entered the supermarket there were exclamations of 'mmmmm the smell!', of 'oooooh the bread!', 'donuts', 'hot chocolate' and 'bakery' (Author A walk, April 4). Sweets were referred to as 'amazing', 'taste like heaven', 'taste like glory' (Author B walk, April 5), to the extent that some defined their relationship with sweets as 'my best friend' or 'my boyfriend' (Author B walk, April 5 and Photo Elicitation, group B, June 13). As with the earlier discussion of treats at school, these ways of relating to food again contrasted with how food is usually valued at school or official health promotion contexts in terms of nutrition. But relationships to food were also complicated by notions of excessive fatness or thinness and needing to fight back against body-shaming.

Q Why did you take so much pictures of food?
A1 Because food is lovely and it's my best friend.
A2 My food is my friend!
Q … Can you explain that to me a little bit more, I'm interested why you think?
A1 Food is just my life.
A3 I live for food.
A2 Like we live on it.
Q Food is fuel yeah.
A1 Do you know how I'm not fat, because like I eat like 800 gallons of food? That's cause I like dance, I run every day
A2 I'm very fat.
Q … Do you actually think you are fat?
A2 Yeah? I'm very fat.
A3 You can't say I'm not now because I am, I know I am.
Q I'd be worried about what you're saying here …
A1 I had to go to the doctors because my seven year-old sister could fit into my clothes.
Q Ok and do you think its ok to be fat or do you think it's not good or do you think its frowned upon or people treat you worse … ?
A1 Worse.
A2 Worse.
A1 You get bullied.
Q And do you think is that fair.
A1 No.
A3 … You get bullied over (being) skinny as well.
Q So you get bullied regardless … how would you fight bullying?
A3 You're out there and someone calls you fat, you call them skinny, 'your Mam doesn't feed you', like at least I get fed.
A1 There's fights every day, there's fights every day like in our class, you don't even understand, like everywhere, everywhere in primary.
(Author B Photo Elicitation 2B, June 13)

Food is related to above in comforting and nourishing terms as 'lovely', 'my life' and 'my best friend', emphasising the non-human capacity of food and taste to affect some to the point that it is given traditionally human attributes. This relationship to food might not be considered as indicating the lack of 'real' human/adult support or nourishment: rather, it might be understood partially as an imaginative way of responding to the normative pressures of both health and heterogendered gazes, where their body shapes are inescapably judged. With respect to the associated peer conflict, as Ringrose and Renold (2010) argue, policy discourses on bullying are embedded in classed, racialised and gendered idealisations of masculinities and femininities, and over-simplified notions of non-normative aggressors and passive victims. Notably, the girl who describes herself as fat above refuses such reductive binaries, saying she would prefer to 'get fed' than be called skinny (i.e. refusing the idea that girls should 'be friends' and boys should 'stand up for themselves'). Underlining the complex and contradictory pushes and pulls of the gendered and classed food consumption assemblage, her fight-back involves both 'skinny-shaming', and emphasising how she is better taken care of than some other girls.

Discussion and conclusion

Our exploration of food consumption in an Irish working-class city neighbourhood with 11–12-year-old girls generated many examples of how social, economic, cultural, aesthetic and sensory materialities are inextricably linked with each other in shaping the girls' food relationships, desires and experiences of inequalities. Methodologically, one of the benefits of using PPM was that it provided a way of exploring not just where experiences happen, what they look like, and how they unfold, but what they feel like. PPM offered an additional insight into a range of other consumer capitalist and public policy futures for children in this context; including terrains of predominantly 'youth' and 'adult' food consumption (the park, café, etc.), and landscapes of available employment (particularly the beauty and catering industry) in the neighbourhood.

Our wider research indicated these girls were keenly aware of normatively healthy and unhealthy foods outlined in school food pedagogies, and public health messaging. They were also capable of identifying dubious marketing strategies to encourage people to purchase unhealthy products in their local area. On one level, this points to the success of health campaigns and food education. But as we discuss elsewhere (Fernández, Kitching, and Horgan 2021), there was a significant degree of performativity around, and disidentification from, certain food pedagogy/adult-led 'pushes' for self-surveillance, such as checking for food labels for nutrition levels. The girls often acknowledged the pulls and pleasures of a range of self-driven eating practices constituted as unhealthy. Available and inexpensive food, such as hot chocolate at the supermarket, or the bag of sweets from Mike's, were used more to negotiate growing up and form local identities and relationships, rather than as an expression of 'making the right choice'. In many ways, these practices serve the important purpose of strengthening and shaping peer relationships, and it is possible that they may help support some girls' mental health in instances of peer conflict and relative socio-economic and cultural marginalisation.

Thus our data echoes Tuck's (2009) analysis of desire as not simply a matter of compliance with or resistance (e.g. to certain foods and food norms) and Rich's (2010) complication of binary ideas of obesity surveillance and resistance. It emphasises multiple pushes and pulls: the girls were involved in reproducing, resisting, being complicit in, withdrawing from and participating in adult-centred, classed and gendered relationships to food and ideas about health. For example, finding bargains and deals both reflected an environment saturated with marketing processed and normatively unhealthy food, and an expression of relative autonomy and recognition in peer groups, and with some adults in this working-class context. Food-related spaces that were desirable were those that cultivated local and peer belonging: particularly at home and in shops that were welcoming. Certainly spaces (particularly franchises considered the preserve of adults) that were hostile, if not openly discriminatory, were not (and possibly could not be) simply ignored. But they certainly failed to cultivate a child- and girl-centred sense of belonging, recognition and care. There were indications of relatively strong identification with (a) foods marketed towards women and girls through ideas of 'obsession', (b) with notions of domestic work (food shopping and preparation) as women's work and (c) with 'girlie' practices such as coffees and chats. While the norms underpinning some of these identifications are restrictive in many respects, at the same time, certain relationships to food offered pleasure, comfort and potential protection for some from the heterogendered/patriarchal and public health surveillance of pre-teen girls' body size and shape.

Understanding food environments as assemblages raises new questions for policy and pedagogy. These questions are less focused on whether food environments are unequivocally healthy/problematic, and more on what multiple potentials, capacities, relationships and desires arise in everyday encounters in these environments. The notion of assemblage offers opportunities to think holistically beyond 'improving child health' in somewhat pre-defined terms, to building 'a richness of capacities' (Fox and Alldred 2016, 291). Certainly, these capacities need to include safe/secure and equitable access to education, employment, public space and possibly even food sovereignty (Fox et al. 2018). i.e. citizen control of food production, markets and cultures. But more fundamentally for the purposes of this paper, they involve recognising and engaging the multi-layered, multi-scalar, dynamic relationships girls (and children more broadly) develop to food, and how these relationships involve the negotiation of classed, gendered and adult-centred norms. To quote Thompson and Coveney (2018, 111), 'the mantra of restraint, reason and rationality' needs to be rethought, in order to meaningfully encounter the ethico-political role of desire in children's lives. Ideas of assemblage can help avoid fixed, essentialised ideas about the relationship between the child's body and the obesogenic environment, and recognise the value of a variety of multi-layered policy and pedagogical engagements where exhortations to nutrition, physical activity, and a better built environment need to be coupled with the realities of dis/identification, dis/connection and imagination in pre-teen girls' cultures and working-class contexts: realities which include dynamics of belonging, care, discrimination, bargain-hunting and body-shaming.

Notes

1. DEIS schools are Irish state-funded schools that serve areas classified as socio-economically disadvantaged. These schools tend to be the target of a range of additional 'compensatory' skill-based interventions primarily in the fields of literacy, numeracy and health.
2. The children were advised as part of the informed assent process that their anonymised words may be used in publications and presentations.

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