

## **Consumption, Identity and the Case of Local Food**

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### **Summary**

In an era when 'climate change' and our impact on the planet has become increasingly prominent within public discourse (see Carvaiho and Burgess, 2005) this research highlights one aspect embedded within this discourse - the concept of 'green' consumer choice. This research examines the construction of green identities using a group of individuals who are trying to increase their local food consumption, a consumptive pattern replete with its own discourse of environmentalism. In exploring this topic, green consumer choice becomes problematised, embedded within shifting, fractured and conflicting discourses, narratives and multifaceted identities.

## **Introduction**

'Climate change' is fast becoming an issue of great salience. UK policies to mitigate climate change rely in part on the "behaviour of [the] individual and communities" (DEFRA, 2006, p.117). DEFRA argues that it is the way that "we choose to behave" (2006, p.117) that will ultimately help reduce our ecological 'footprint'. Furthermore, DEFRA couches the notions of 'choice' and 'behaviour' in the framework of 'the consumer', arguing that the roles we fill as consumers, and the choices we make when we consume affect the long term viability the biosphere. It seems then in order to address global sustainability, there needs to be a greater understanding of how and why consumers choose or do not choose certain goods and services. Specifically, this research focuses on a group of individuals who consume 'local food', a concept which has been attracting considerable public and policy interest (Morris and Buller, 2003), to examine consumption and identity.

## **Consumption and identity in the literature**

### *Theoretical basis*

In Douglas and Isherwood's (1996) *The World of Goods*, material commodities are seen as not just having purely functional benefits, but also fulfil symbolic roles, in "mediating and communicating personal, social and cultural meaning" (Jackson, 2005, p.30). Thus the consumption of material commodities not only has a functional value, but also serves to construct and maintain identity (Jackson, 2005, 2004).

### *'Discourse' and 'Narrative'*

Somers (1994) argues that within the relational setting of public and institutional discourses and social practises, multiple and changing identities are constituted through actors deploying conflicting narratives. Moreover, through the consumption of particular goods and services, individuals situate themselves within particular narratives and help to maintain and construct an identity, the individual narratives of the self (Valentine, 1999). Somers (1994) uses the term 'narrative' loosely to describe institutional and master discourses in which we are embedded, as well as ontological narratives – narratives concerned with the definition of the self. While recognising that the two interlock, this paper draws a distinction between discourse and narrative. Discourse is seen here as those bigger than the individual – institutional (including academic) and master - which are key determinants of social life that maintain conventional ways of knowing the world (Rapport and Overing, 2000). On the other hand, narratives are conceptualised as forms of representation, and in this case representations of the self. While Rapport and Overing (2000) see representational

narrative as providing "human lives with a sense of order and meaning within and across time" (p.283-284), this paper sees them as temporally and contextually contingent.

### *Consumption, materialities, food, meaning and sustainability*

It is argued by some commentators that at the current rate of consumption, especially within America and Europe, the biosphere's long-term viability is being threatened (Schaefer and Crane, 2005). In this respect Wilk (2002) argues that we need to take a multi-perspective approach to studying consumption, leaving behind conceptions of choice which emphasise practical aspects such as price and utility, perhaps seen in much of the existing traditional psychological and marketing conceptualisations of consumption as individual choice (Schaefer and Crane, 2005, Mostafa, 2007). However, some contemporary work seems to be stressing the role of social and symbolic meaning in consumption choice (Christensen *et. al.*, 2007) and identity processes (Bonaiuto *et. al.*, 2002; Uzzel, Pol and Badenas, 2002; Sparks and Shepard, 1992). Thus, Wilk (2002) argues in examining consumption choice one must consider consumption as identity and explore cultural systems of meaning and value<sup>1</sup>.

### *Consumption and identity: a postmodern concern?*

Firat and Venkatesh (1995) suggest that postmodernism has displaced modernism's emphasis on production with a concern for consumption, whereby the act of consumption is not seen as a private act of destruction by the consumer, but as a moment of production, "wherein symbolic meanings, social codes, political ideologies and relationships are produced and reproduced" (p.251). Therefore, within the current epoch of 'individualisation', characterised by a disembedding of individuals from institutions and the disintegration of class and family, important sources of identity (Beck and Beck-Gernshiem, 2002), consumption becomes a key mechanism through which individuals can consciously choose to construct their identities.

Yet, within the postmodern epoch, symbols and meanings continually shift (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995) leading to unstable identities which can be disposed of and reconstructed at will (Kellner, 1992). In this regard postmodern identities become fractured, highly fluid, yet in some regard meanings, symbols and identities are still restrained by dominant capitalist and masculine values. Thus, postmodernist identity construction through consumption allows for new possibilities, styles, models and forms but not the death of identity or free-floating symbolism (Kellner, 1992). Here the postmodern emphasis of 'free' choice may have to be problematised "because social setting sets the framework for every choice" (Haanpaa, 2007, p.484). In this regard identity is seen, in line with Jackson (1999), as being multiple yet contested and subject to regulatory frameworks of cultural

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<sup>1</sup> As with Wilk (2002) the author recognises that consumption may also be influenced by constraints of gender and social organisation as well as socio-economic status, such factors are not the primary concerns of this research.

norms and expectations, thereby recognising the "embeddedness of identity in shifting constellations of relations and symbolic, institutional and material practises" (Valentine, 1999, p.495). Therefore "people are guided to act in certain ways and not others, on the basis of the projections, expectations, and memories derived from a multiplicity but ultimately limited repertoire of available social, public and cultural [discourses]" (Somers, 1994, p.614).

### *Consumption, food and a 'Green' identity*

Green attitudes and consumption patterns can be regarded as a life style-based expression of an individual's concern for the environment, where lifestyle is seen as primarily a matter of activities or behaviour of both individuals and groups (including consumer behaviour) affected by values and attitudes (Haanpaa, 2007). In this section the connections between food consumption and 'green' identities are explored.

Warde (1997) argues that food consumption, while "it does have some applications ... is not much used in the playing of identity games" (p.203) and suggests that on a great many occasions people eat and watch other people eat without engaging social classificatory judgements. However, Warde (1997) does suggest that we can share patterns of dietary behaviour with others. It is this aspect of sharing patterns of dietary behaviour that Warde (1997) suggests might play a more positive role in the production of identity. Indeed, he highlights how through niche-like food consumption behaviours, some groups of individuals can express positive and conscious social, ethical or religious commitments through dietary regimes (Warde, 1997), a line of argument that I draw upon within this research. Here then Warde (1997) does suggest that food and drink can be partly constitutive of the self (also see: Douglas and Isherwood 1996, p.45). Consumption of certain foods could then become "an act where people express their personal and group identity" (Birch, Barret and Wiedmann, undated, p.251). Moreover, while some groups may be 'style' groups, others can behave in accordance with the political logic of new social movements (Warde, 1997). Thus, from this I take the view that food and its consumption could speak for us and also could place us within social groups and political movements - it could signify group belonging and reflect values or ethical commitments.

In this context of ethics and values, I seek to develop the argument that food can become a signifier for 'green' identities amongst environmental activists - people can "literally eat their way into [green] identity positions" (Horton, 2003, p.71). Yet, the continual performance of a green identity through food consumption is externally monitored and validated or debased by other members of the green movement. In this way the kitchen shelves can become a signifier of one's green identity, but also reveal the slippages in one's green commitments. Green identities are a performance mediated through materialities, yet these materialities are monitored by other members of the 'green culture', leading to a precarious 'green identity' which has to be constantly

remade through the appropriate performances within the 'green community' in order to maintain its credibility to both the self and others (Horton, 2003). Thus, as Jenkins (2008) notes, identity is not fixed in the dialectical relationship with the other; instead, identity is performed, accepted, refuted, contested and caught up in relations of power.

The consumption of 'green' food can be a signifier of a wider commitment to environmental identity, where eating 'green' can be embedded within other consumptive displays of environmentalism, such as cycling or walking or the lack of a television and dressing in appropriately casual or even scruffy clothing (Horton, 2003). Thus, goods, in this case foods, are relational, while food can be symbolic of a green identity and environmentalism, it is the relationship that 'green' food has with other signifiers e.g. scruffy dress, a bicycle, that perhaps signifies a green identity. As Douglas and Isherwood (1996) note "one physical object has no meaning by itself ... [t]he meaning is in the relations between all the goods, just as music is in the relations marked out by the sounds and not in any one note." (p.49). The significance and meaning of the consumption of objects then becomes relational in two aspects, an object or mode of consumption becomes meaningful only in relation to other patterns of consumption, and while these modes of consumption are partly constitutive of our presentation of the self, this presentation can be accepted, refuted and contested by the other.

#### *Local food, consumption and meaning*

This section explores the notion of 'local food' and looks at the popular and academic discourses which surround it. In this respect these discourses of local food are seen as some of those available from which to construct narrative of the self.

"Tell me what you eat and I'll tell you who you are"

(Messer, 1984: Taken from Sparks and Shepard, 1994, p.397).

What is termed 'local' is a matter of perspective (Seyfang, 2007) and the significance of the consumption of certain foods can vary when viewed through different individual frameworks (James, 1993; Allen et al., 2003). From an environmentalist perspective, local food can be seen as a more sustainable (Seyfang, 2003) especially in relation to sourcing food from global production networks as food grown and consumed locally, it is argued, reduces the distance food has to travel from farm to plate (Pretty, 2001; Iles, 2005). This idea of the distance food travels from production to consumption has been captured in the notion of 'food miles' allowing the consumer to visualise the energy and ecological costs of transporting food over long distances (Iles, 2005). Small localised production systems can also be seen as contra to large scale incumbent production and

consumption systems which fail to offer the market choice of sustainability, "such as fresh, local organic food in season" (Seyfang and Smith, 2007, p.592) and represent a desire to bypass intensive industrial agriculture and global food networks (Seyfang, 2008).

Consumption of local food may also be seen as a way to forge bonds between consumers and local growers and serve a community building function (Seyfang, 2003). In a related view local food networks may also be linked into discourses of social justice through trying to address the problems of providing healthy food particularly to low income communities (Allen et. al., 2003), an example, perhaps, of a discourse surrounding local food that links it to an 'ethic of care' (DuPuis and Goodman, 2005). Local food can also be intrinsically linked to discourses of 'quality' (Hinrichs, 2003; Holloway and Kneafsey, 2000) and be seen as more 'natural' (Winters, 2003a), fresh (Hein et al, 2006) healthy and safer than 'global food' (Murdoch, Marsden and Banks, 2000). This discourse can link high quality food with a premium price tag - its consumption signifies one's good sense and discrimination. In this context, local/high quality food can become 'yuppie chow' (Seyfang, 2009, p.5). Moreover, consuming local food can also be viewed as a way to support local farming businesses (See Lockie, 2001), which can erase concerns for environmental practices and agro-food sustainability, and which may also represent a symbolic action towards 'defensive' localism (Winters, 2003b, also see Hinrichs, 2003) e.g. parochial conservative values and the seeking to exclude others (Seyfang 2007). Yet, in Holloway and Kneafsey's (2000) study concerned with farmers markets, 'local' was found to be read simultaneously by respondents in ways that could be seen as both parochial and conservative as well as more 'alternative', 'green', or sustainable.

This research looks at the symbolic nature of local food and how it is constructed. Specifically it looks at how the discourses of local food are drawn upon by the subjects of this study, and how food is used to project and construct narratives of the self. Moreover examining how consumption, especially food, is used to construct the self, this paper will examine the complexities surrounding the concept of choice in relation to both identity and environmental concerns.

## **Methods**

### *Ethnographic techniques*

This research was based around ethnographic techniques of collecting data: Participant observation, face-to-face semi-structured interviews, document collection and opportunism – e.g. gathering "whatever data that [were] available to throw light on the issues" (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p.1).

### *Participant observation*

Mainly through participating in a community garden and in helping to set up and by volunteering at a Stewardship Festival, I managed to become involved with those who identified themselves as local food consumers or producers. During my contact with individuals involved in either the production or consumption of local food I identified myself as student carrying out research on the local food movement.

### *Interviews*

In total six, 'formal' interviews were recorded, lasting between 30 to 50 minutes. The interviewees, who all self identified as local food consumers, were selected during my time spent in the community garden or involved in the Stewardship festival. The interviewees do not represent a random sample and all the interviewees were closely involved or had links with one particular charity within the area of study.

### *Document collection and other data*

Documents are a legitimate source of data in ethnographic research (Walsh, 2004) and documents such as leaflets pertaining to the local food movement, producers' catalogues and promotional material etc were collected for analysis. Furthermore, in the spirit of Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) (e.g. 'opportunism'), other data such as publicly accessible talks were recorded with the speaker's permission.

## **The study area and the 'nature of network'**

### *The research area*

The research area was delimited to a coastal area of Scotland largely comprising of "accessible rural settlements"<sup>2</sup>, with a long history of varied industrial production, farming and fisheries activity. In recent years, while manufacturing does still play an important role in the economy, the fishery industry has gone into decline with a similar trend seen in the numbers of livestock. The service sector now accounts for over half of the economic activity within the study area, with tourism being an important part of this sector.

### *The nature of the 'Network'*

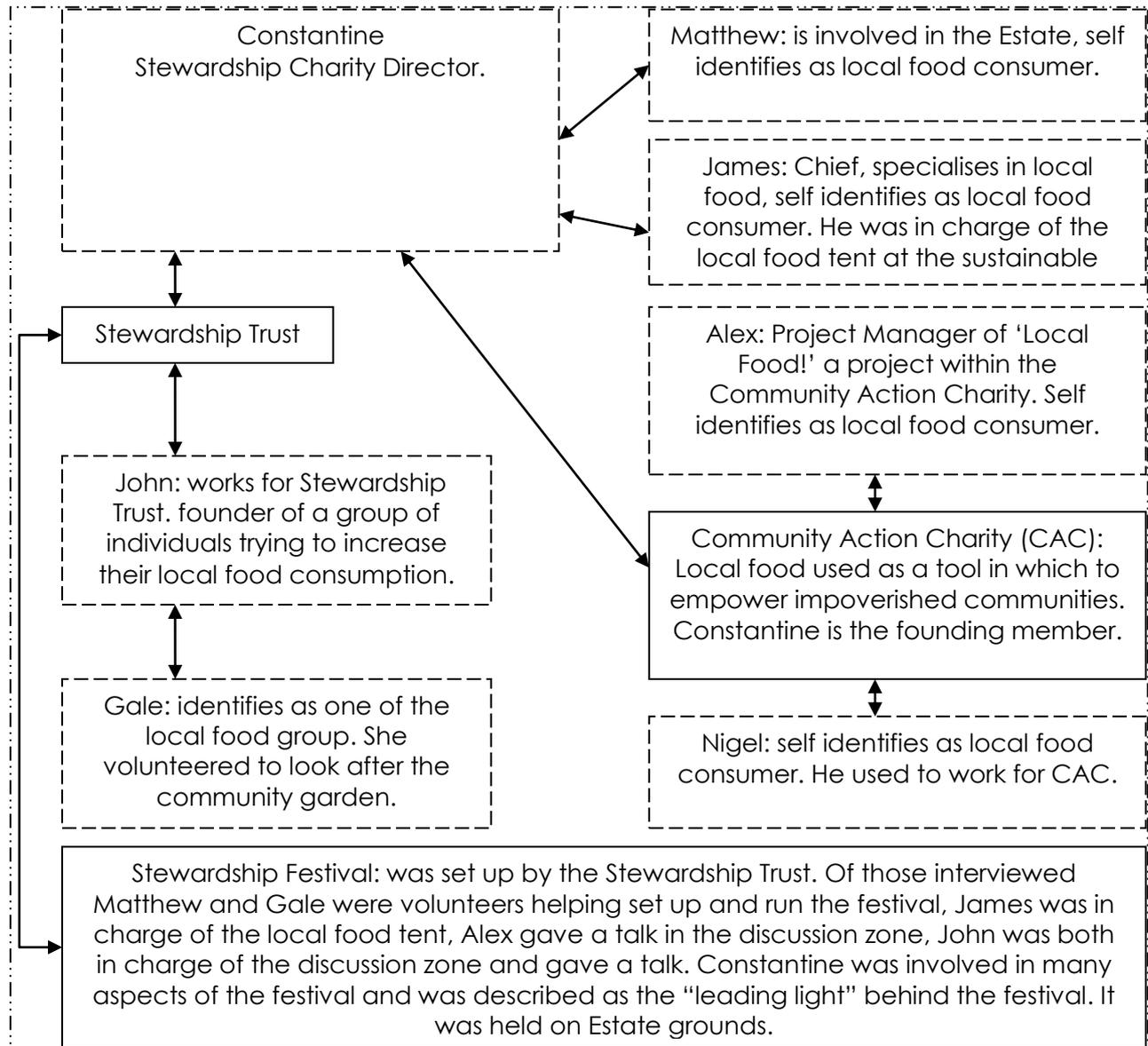
One of the hubs of the local food network in the study area was the Stewardship Charity which operated on a landed estate. Through contact with the Stewardship Trust and Stewardship Charity, links between organisations and individuals were identified - the diagram below (Diagram, 1)

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/47133/0031405.pdf>

illustrates the network of individuals who were interviewed. While this diagram is a simplistic depiction, it serves to highlight the network of individuals who are prominent within the study area, in the context of local food. The majority of the research was embedded within this network of individuals and institutions.

**Diagram 1: The Nature of the 'Network'**



**Figure 1: A local food dinner**



### **Local food and its consumption as signifier of identity**

“Firstly as a consumer I have always been quite thoughtful about what I eat and what it says about who I am. So in a sense it's kind of highly symbolic and it's a practical incarnation of who you are”

Constantine.

This section explores how, through the consumption of local food, individuals within the network situated themselves within certain discourses and use them to construct narratives of the self.

### James

James is a chef with a long history of using local ingredients in his work. James's parents had been involved in the setting up of the Soil Association, a charity which champions sustainable, organic farming and human health<sup>3</sup>, which he saw as instrumental in his concern for the environmental consequences of his actions. Perhaps unsurprisingly, due to his background and identity as a chef, James' narrative of the self revolved strongly around environmentalism and concerns over quality.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.soilassociation.org/>

In this respect, for James the consumption of local food was a materiality that constructed and maintained these narratives

### Matthew

Through his family, Matthew, had become involved in left wing politics and environmentalism in his early teens. He had studied Politics at university and for the past few years had helped on the Estate as well as working for Friends of the Earth for two days a week. His narratives of social concern and environmentalism were affirmed through the consumption of local food.

“I have always come from a view of supporting the most marginalised or poorest in society and also being concerned for the environment a lot, yeah so [local food] fits into that”

Matthew.

### Nigel

Nigel has been involved in voluntary work across the world and had helped develop a food localisation programme for CAC. His work continues to revolve around questions of food, ecology, sustainability and social justice. Situating himself in discourses of community building and environmentalism, Nigel argued:

“I have a set of values that I live by; it is about community intervention, ecology, sustainability, so local food is important, it is an embodiment of those values”

Nigel.

### Alex

Alex had studied Political Philosophy at an Ivy League University. Along with Nigel, Alex had similarly been heavily involved, through work, in questions surrounding food, social justice and community building as well as environmentalism. While the environmental discourse was drawn upon, an ethic of care – community empowerment, social justice - and the concept of ‘connection’ were important too.

“I think that political engagement is our crowning glory ... I think that doing political engagement in your local area is probably the best way to get started and so for me local in general is good and local food is part of that ... it is [also] about your own sense of identity living in a place and belonging as a human being to the planet and to where you live”

Alex.

## Gale

For Gale, local food most strongly confirmed her narrative of community concern and health. In this way the preparation of food and the presence of dirt on the ingredients signify freshness and healthiness of the ingredients as well as her connection to the land and the community.

“You know if carrots have got dirt on it ... then it connects you with the soil and connects you with the community. [It] is more connecting than a tin of carrot soup”

Gale.

Gale found that the consumption of local food, especially at Column's, an organic/local food outlet situated within the study area, engendered a sense of connection and community that she did not get at the supermarket.

## Constantine

Constantine had previously been a community worker in a large city in Scotland. Much like his previous work, his current direction was very much centred on community and community-building and he saw the estate he helped run as a community asset. While local food constructed a narrative of environmentalism, Constantine argued that

“Eating local food was as much about a community thing”

Constantine.

Almost all of those interviewed noted that at one particular outlet, Column's, there was a sense of community, unlike supermarkets, and this was no different for Constantine.

“Going to Column's is an experience of community that I don't get at supermarkets”

Constantine.

And much like Gale, he also saw the consumption of local food as a way to connect. These were two elements to the concept of community within the network, one which saw the building of links between consumers and the other which saw building of links between consumers and local producers, an embedding of social networks within economic relationships (Seyfang, 2007):

“So I guess the antithesis of local food is food that could come from anywhere and grown by anybody and it doesn't matter who, so the people and the place behind it have kind of become obsolete, you know the food's identity has been stamped out”

Constantine.

This sense of connection both to the land, the producers and those who also consume local food appears to represent what Warde (1997) describes as “communification” - a continual desire to restore, recreate or invent communities through consumptive acts, not least through the consumption of food. This desire is due to the comfort gained from knowing how to act in appropriate ways and apparently sharing, with like minded people, a consensus of what compromises a decent and good life (Warde, 1997).

Local food and its consumption became a symbol of community, and a shared belonging to place. It became a symbol which encompassed and condensed a range of discourses and meanings (Jenkins, 2008) – e.g. community building/social justice, environmentalism and quality/health. Through purchasing local food one came to signal one's belonging to place and a collectivity of like-minded individuals. The community represented one's concerns and reinforced one's narratives of the self; it became a constituent of identity<sup>4</sup>. In this respect Column's became a site at which to practise certain aspects of ones identity (Anderson, 2004), situating ones self in a collectivity of like minded people and within discourses of environmental concern, social justice/community building and tradition, health and quality.

### **Food choice and shifting consumption**

All of the people interviewed had at some point been involved in various dietary regimes linked to ethical and political commitments. The consumption of locally sourced food for many of those interviewed represented a move away from previous dietary commitments and towards the drawing upon of different discourses to reconstruct their narratives of identity and regimes of consumption. This section explores these shifting narratives of self and shifting consumption regimes.

Matthew as a student used to buy the cheapest food possible in the supermarket, not due to economic circumstance but because, as he saw it he was:

“being humble with my money”

Matthew.

something which he saw as reinforcing his strong left wing narrative at the time.

However, Matthew shifted towards the consumption of local food – allowing him to situate himself in both an environmental and an ethic of care discourse, in fitting with his left wing ideology. In this

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<sup>4</sup> While the purchasing of food may be a mechanism by which to project identity, consumers may well buy local food for the novelty and atmosphere within local food outlets. In this sense the experience of local food outlets becomes itself a commodity (Smithers et al, 2008). There may very well be an aspect of this within the network, and certainly through buying/consuming food within Column's one potentially buys into an atmosphere of community.

way, Matthew interwove this narrative of environmental concern with his previous narratives of self and (re)constructed his consumption patterns.

“When you look into it more if you're buying things that don't cost a lot they are often the ones that have the worst systems of produce behind them so I have definitely moved more towards local food ... especially in the last couple of years”

Matthew.

Nigel, Alex and Constantine had been vegetarians, each drawing on different discourses surrounding vegetarianism. Yet all three had now moved to eating meat. Alex had situated herself in a discourse of vegetarianism which saw the feeding of livestock, for meat production, as unethical when there were people going hungry across the world. Alex now tries to eat locally sourced game (which is not fed on food which could otherwise be used for human consumption) allowing her to (re)construct narratives of environmentalism and social justice – a previous narrative of her vegetarianism.

Gale had previously consumed organic produce due to health concerns revolving around her daughter. However, the environmental implications of importing organic food led to a rebuilding of her consumption towards local produce to (re)construct her environmental narrative identity.

“Well we started eating organic after our first daughter was born, with this idea of the 'pure' child we don't want to start putting bad things inside her. But that can get a bit extreme, flying in veg from ... all over the world sort of thing”

Gale.

Such stories woven around food highlights the temporality of food choice, even 'ethical' food choice, how consumption patterns shift with reconstructing narratives - how unstable food choice can be across temporalities.

### **Food, consumption and identity, conflicting narratives and difficult choices**

“There are a lot of choices, and choices are critical ... 'is local more important than the way it is grown?', 'is organic to be balanced against food miles?', 'what about the issue of fair trade?' and 'local fair trade or international fair trade?'. If you're actually even trying to pursue an ethical agenda with your food, there are actually a lot of challenges and a lot of questions to be asked and balances to be made I'm sure”

Extracts from a talk given at the Stewardship Festival.

While within the network those interviewed seemed to share a collective, or community vision surrounding food choice, albeit with the consumption of local food being used to embed one's self more fully in some discourses than in others, on spending time in the network conflicting visions of what constituted the proper choice materialised. Ultimately, this section tries to demonstrate the ambiguity, temporality and contextuality of consumption caught in multiple narratives of the self.

### *Local food and conflicting discourses*

Conflicting discourses of local food were present within the network. This was partly stimulated by an article in the Observer Newspaper which questioned how environmentally benign local food was. Local food, especially if it had been intensively produced while the imported equivalent had been grown in an environmentally friendly manner, using low tech irrigation, natural fertiliser and labour intensive methods as opposed to mechanisation, could be seen as less environmentally benign than imported produce (McKie and Davis, 2008)<sup>5</sup>.

By linking local and organic, with its own similar discourse of sustainability and health (see for example: James, 1993; Tovey, 1997), some, especially John, argued that through consuming local organic food one's narrative of environmentalism would not be threatened. However, Alex found that consuming local organic food clashed with her narrative of social justice.

For Alex organic food was "over priced", an expense which represented a barrier to those on low incomes (and herself) from obtaining healthy fresh food. Thus, while conventionally produced local food was seen as potentially more 'just', it could also be seen as less environmentally benign than local organic<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, even choosing which local food to consume became problematic, caught within multiple narratives of the self.

### *Food, identity and difficult choices*

A further discourse of contestation surrounding local food was found in concerns over social justice, and the ethical implications of eating local food, potentially cutting off impoverished countries from western markets. The ethical nature of local food became problematised within two competing discourses. On the one hand that of social justice and community empowerment, and on the other the ethical ambiguity of potentially depriving impoverished nations of their livelihood. For Alex with her strong ethic of care narrative, the purchasing of local food could deconstruct her ethic of care narrative.

"[I] don't even want to get drawn into this whole Fair Trade Vs Local debate... I don't know the right answer. I find it impossible to pit one against the other"

Alex.

James seemed to overcome this dilemma by arguing that importing food from impoverished countries was morally wrong and argued that they should be growing food for themselves.

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<sup>5</sup> Indeed the concept that small scale farmers are inherently more environmentally benign is also questionable (Hinrichs, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> John, however, a proponent of local organic, argued that his food bills had fallen since trying to eat local organic produce.

However, at times James's narrative identity as a chef conflicted with his narrative of concern over food miles.

“So [my wife and I] we do eat pretty much [local produce], but because I am a chef ... I buy stuff from abroad. I'm really into ginger, coriander and coconut cream at the moment”

James.

While all of those interviewed were trying to increase their consumption of local food, some of food they consumed was clearly not 'local', and all continued to rely on supermarkets – seen by many as the antithesis of the local food movement.

Food consumption also became contingent on others. Constantine as a husband would often consume food that his wife had bought from the supermarket. Alex's husband did most of the food purchasing and Matthew, who also shopped for his lodger, found that his lodger's taste did not fit his, so he went to the supermarket often. Thus, food consumption becomes contingent on one's multifaceted identity, as someone concerned about local food or as a husband, a wife or a landlord.

The multifaceted nature of individuals' narrative identities throws up conflicts over food. Food consumption becomes temporally and contextually contingent and shifts. Does one balance social justice concerns with environmental ones? Does one consume Local, Organic, Local Organic or Fair Trade? Is one consuming as a chef or an environmentalist, a landlord, a husband or wife?

### **Local food, environmentalism and conflicts of identity**

This chapter briefly broadens the concept of consumption from food out towards other consumption practises, and explores the contradictory nature, contextuality and temporality of both consumption and identities and specifically the individual's environmental narrative.

All of those interviewed tended to fit their narrative identities of environmentalism, partially expressed through their consumption of local food, alongside narratives of employment and/or parenthood. Such was the nature of people's multifaceted identities that conflicts were apparent throughout the interviews. Many continued to shop in supermarkets; many drove or flew, seen as antithetical to their environmental narratives, due to commitments to work or family. This section explores these conflicts.

While commitments to jobs and family brought about consumption that threatened to un-weave environmental narrative identities, even having hobbies seen as partly congruent with the ethos of local food brought about its own conflicts. Alex and her husband, who are keen hikers, saw climbing and hiking as a way to connect to Scotland and the area she lived in. However, the

contradiction this threw up again threatened to deconstruct her narrative of environmental concern.

“When we go mountaineering I drive a car up to [an area of Scotland]. All of these things that you know in your heart are not good things to be doing but you do them anyway. I guess because it is more important at that moment to go hill walking than it is not to drive your car”

Alex.

It is here that we can see the contextuality and temporality of 'choice', the clash and contradiction of multiple narrative identities. However, while there were certain contexts and temporalities where their consumption and their narratives of environmental concern conflicted, many people tried to be consistent in their actions and consumption as much as possible. Indeed through consumption, and engagement in the discourses of local food, some noticed a growing awareness of the environmental impact of other aspects of their lives.

“[Through eating local food] you become aware of everything, because it is at the bottom of the chain, everything is affected by what you eat, you then start thinking about things

Gale.

Thus, food was seen as a niche in which to act (Smith, 2006; Seyfang, 2007), where they tried to construct and maintain certain narratives of the self. However, in trying to construct and maintain these narratives of the self through the consumption of local food, conflicts in their consumption patterns were highlighted.

## **Discussion**

### *Food and its consumption, out with an individualistic paradigm?*

Seyfang and Smith (2007) argue that by joining small every day decisions about food, for whatever reason, communities of citizens form and can participate in a radical creative process that may represent a form of collective action, which may, not only transform the market choices available but the entire market system itself. In this study the narratives of community and connection have already been highlighted earlier. However, food choice is not about simple every day decisions but is entangled in conflicting and multiple discourses and multiple narratives of the self. As Alex noted:

“If I am confused and I work in this field think how hard it is for the average consumer to make these choices”

Alex.

Therefore the notion of a community of consumer citizens acting together has to be problematised. Indeed what this research has shown is that even though there was talk of connection and community, each of those individuals, while sharing a collective similarity in consumption choice in certain locations (e.g. Column's) – in fact represented individuals consuming in relation to multifaceted, complex, temporal and contextuality dependant identities. Thus, while seemingly acting/consuming together, what I would argue this research has shown is that they act individually, caught within their own multifaceted identities.

Thus, in respect to Seyfang and Smith's (2007) argument, one must ask whether instead what is being created is shifting, ephemeral communities of individuals joined by an immediate connection through the purchase of one good only to be disconnected with the purchase of a different product. In this respect the illusion of community is broken down to its constituents: the consumers acting individually, consuming to express and perform their shifting and multifaceted identities.

#### *Individualised consumption, a positive force?*

Bryan and Goodman (2004) wonder how far purely consumption based modes of action can really effect change, without political engagement. However, Clarke et al (2007) suggest that ethical consumerism represents a political phenomenon and that ethical consumerism is a means of extending existing concerns into new fields of practise and are related to new forms of public action over a range of contentious issues. This may represent a primary mode of political engagement, distinct from classical political modes of engagement - collective mobilisation, lobbying and claims making. Indeed, they go on to argue that ethical consumption does not require a full overhaul of one's identity as an ethical consumer and that it does not require fully formed embodied elaborations of the self at all. Consumer politics can be undertaken in singularities – “a purchase, an investment a donation” (Clarke et al, 2007, p.247).

In this respect those within the network seemed to fit within this conception of the ethical consumer. Those within the network admitted that there were conflicts within their consumption choices and multifaceted identities. However, some of those within the network did not endorse the view that ethical consumerism represented a primary means of political engagement.

“Beyond individual stuff I think it is up to government to do a lot. I think the government needs to do a lot more so I am involved in political work at Friends of the Earth”

Matthew.

“I say we perfect ourselves through politics not through the individual choices of what coffee to drink”

Alex.

The danger with a consumerist, individualistic approach to political engagement is that it “accentuates the primary importance of the individual and virtues of self reliance and independence of the social and institutional environment for sustainable development” (Moslander and Pesonen, 2002, p.333-334). Ultimately, such a discourse sees individuals as consumers who have the means and therefore ultimately the responsibility for environmental protection. Accordingly they could also be seen to be to blame if the ethical, sustainable development that those within this network strive for fails to materialise (Moslander and Pesonen, 2002).

## **Conclusion**

This research has looked at how individuals construct narratives of the self through consumption, with emphasis on local food. Ultimately, this work argues that instead of individuals invoking stable narrative of the self across contexts and temporalities, we find multiple narratives and conflicting consumption patterns emerging. In this respect consumption choice becomes problematised, and the effectiveness of consumer led change is questioned. However, while the concept of individual consumption choice is not without its difficulties, it is not without its benefits. Commodities framed within certain discourses that speak to the alternative consumer may make people more aware of what is 'going on' (Bryant and Goodman, 2004), and indeed through this awareness perhaps there will be motivation to address other areas of their consumption (Cox et al, 2008) and engage at other levels. Thus, in order not to attenuate the conceivable in agro-food activism (Guthman, 2008) local food must continue to be framed in discourses of environmentalism, social justice, and political engagement.

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