Food & Trust: what are young people’s perspectives?

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Introduction
The value of understanding food choice is of significance to public health given the central role played by food choice and diet in the prevention and development of many major chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, and some cancers (AIHW 2008).

Food choice is, however, a complex phenomenon influenced by biological, cultural, economic and psycho-social factors. One factor which affects food choice is trust in food sources (Caplan et al. 1997; Sobal et al. 2006). Trust impacts three important areas that may be of concern to public health nutrition, food choice, trust in expert guidelines and recommendations, and food regulation.

While it has been argued that individuals must rely on systems of expert knowledge, empirical literature also suggests that there is declining trust in expert knowledge in a number of democratic countries (Hardin 2006). A lack of trust is evident in Western Europe due to growing unease about food safety caused by incidents such as BSE/Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (Hansen et al. 2005). In an Australian context, a small qualitative study conducted in Adelaide with participants aged 18-65 years found a lack of trust in expert messengers, such as the National Heart Foundation arising from the endorsement of food for companies who can afford to have their food tested (Coveney 2008).

For many studies conducted on food and trust, a generic consumer is assumed, one who is neither gender, nor age, or class specific. As such, the results often reflect the views of a population which is predominately middle-aged, Caucasian and female. The impact of trust on the food choices of young adults is relatively unknown.

Given the importance of the foundation of healthy eating habits in early adulthood, it is important to understand the role of trust in the food choices of young adults.

The “Food and Trust: What are young people’s perspectives?” research is an exploratory study into food and trust from the perspectives of young Australians aged 18 to 25 years. The aim of the study was to examine the notion of trust and its impact on the food purchases of young people.

The following three aims were used as guidance:
1. Identify factors that determine the nature and extent of young consumers trust in food.
2. Identify sources of information which influence young consumer food choices.
3. Investigate how (micro)impacts on young people’s food choices.

Methods
The aims and objectives were explored through a qualitative approach which captures the meanings that people attach to experiences, enabling exploration of under-researched areas such as trust and its impact on young consumer food choices (Lierness & Eazy 2005).

Participants were recruited via three methods: through a market and health research company; through a flyer posted at various locations on campus at the Flinders University of South Australia; and through snowballing.

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with each participant. The semi-structured interviews followed a schedule which served as a guide. The interview schedule was developed in consultation with the research team and reflected a theoretical framework based on social theories of trust. The interview schedule was piloted before the interviews. Core questions remained constant throughout the interviews, however appendant issues arose during the interviews. All interviews were conducted by the primary author and audio taped with permission and transcribed. All respondents’ names were changed to maintain confidentiality. The study was approved by the Flinders University and Southern Adelaide Health Service Social and Behavioural Research Ethics committee.

Results
Eight participants (4 males) were recruited for in-depth interviews.

Table: Names (given for research), age and occupation of research participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Darren</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jake</td>
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<td>Martin</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(*all participants were given pseudonyms)

Discussion
The main theme running through the data is the notion that young people, within their day to day lives, are not concerned with issues surrounding trust and food as life presents other, more necessary, demands.

The idea of trust as ‘taken for granted’ is evident throughout the responses of the participants within this study as most of the participants were not concerned with the safety and quality of their food, and some had not even considered this to be an issue before being questioned.

There was a general presumption that food regulation was occurring somewhere and somehow, the exact details of which could not be detailed by any of the young people. All of these characteristics suggest young people’s trust in food is routine and taken for granted. In other words, they have confidence in systems which they expect to deliver safe, healthy foods to consumers.

Finally, The concept of reflexivity is pertinent to understanding young people’s trust in food and has become a prominent theme throughout the analysis. It could be argued that these young people are non-reflexive; that is, they do not consciously think about food regulation when making food choices. This was evident in a number of interviews where participants said that they had never considered the idea of food regulation and its role in food safety.

What this research tells us
Few studies have delved into the impact of trust on the food choices of young adults. The results presented here are exploratory however, findings suggest that young people in this study are generally concerned with issues of cost and convenience in regards to food choice rather than the safety of food, which was taken for granted in an Australian setting.

This group of young people was conscious of health, but issues of long term health did not greatly impact on their food choices, reflecting findings from similar research.

Analysis shows that young people are not reflexive in regards to food choice, food safety or quality and instead have confidence in the food system to provide a safe product and are therefore, content to take risks with food choice and health.

References:


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For further information