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# Food, Convenience and Sustainability (FOCAS)

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# The FOCAS project

- The FOCAS project (Food, Convenience and Sustainability) was part of the third strand of the SUSFOOD programme on understanding consumer behaviour to encourage more sustainable food choice
- FOCAS included a multi-disciplinary team of researchers (anthropology, geography, sociology and media studies) from four countries (Denmark, Germany, Sweden and UK).

# The work-packages

- Focused on a range of foods that are ‘convenient’ in different ways, offering ‘convenience’ at different points in the process of planning, purchasing, cooking, eating and disposing of food:
  - WP 1 Processed baby-food: Professor Helene Brembeck and Dr Maria Fuentes (Sweden)
  - WP 2 Supermarket ready-meals: Professor Peter Jackson (UK) and Dr Valerie Viehoff (Germany)
  - WP 3 Canteen food: Dr Jonathan Everts and Christine Wenzl (Germany)
  - WP 4 Meal-box schemes: Professor Bente Halkier and Frej Daniel Hertz (Denmark)..



# Background/state-of-the-art

- Convenience food is a contested category, hard to define and difficult to translate, but conventionally regarded as among the least healthy and most unsustainable dietary options
  - BMJ (2012) study reported that none of the 100 ready-meals tested met WHO dietary guidelines (in terms of sugar, salt and saturated fat)
  - DEFRA's Green Food Project (2013) reported on the environmental impact of imported ingredients, wasteful packaging, large portion sizes
- Encompasses a wide variety of processed or semi-processed food
- Often contrasted with 'proper' home-made food, using fresh ingredients, cooked from scratch.



# Research questions

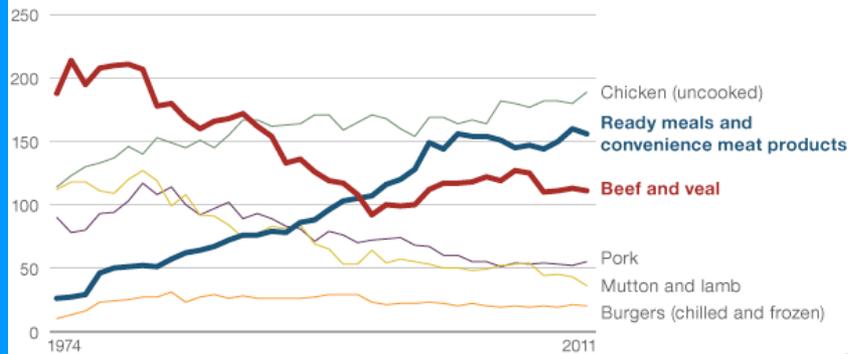
- How do consumers incorporate ‘convenience’ foods as part of their everyday lives?
- What ‘stocks of knowledge’ do they deploy in understanding the health and sustainability implications of their dietary choices?
- What is the value of a ‘theories of practice’ approach for the development of healthier and more sustainable dietary choices?



# Growth of convenience sector

Meat purchased in the UK (1974-2011)

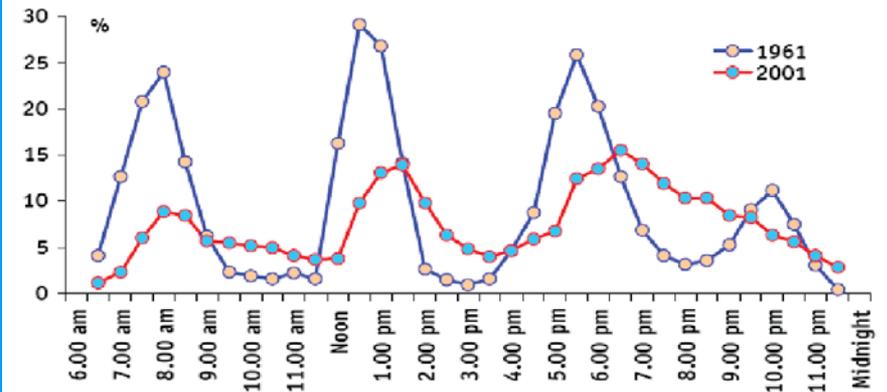
UK averages per person per week, in grams\*



\*Food brought into the household only  
Source: Defra

## Meals are less bound to particular times - people are eating when and where it is convenient

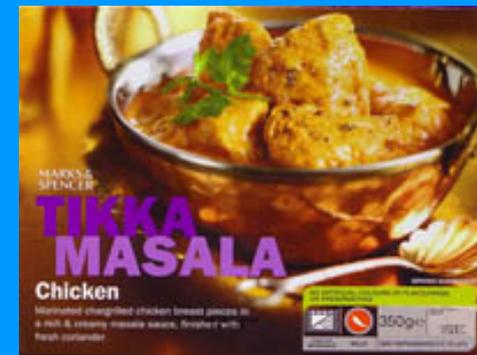
% eating or drinking, in or out of home, by time of day, all days<sup>2</sup>





# The market for convenience food

- Rapid growth across Europe (and particularly in the UK) since the 1970s
- Associated with increased female labour force participation; socio-technical innovations (domestic refrigeration and microwave cooking); the development of the 'cold-chain' in food manufacturing and retailing; growth of car ownership and supermarket shopping.



# Findings, outputs, results

- Systematic review published in *Appetite* (Jackson & Viehoff 2016) covering:
  - Time-saving and time-shifting
  - Domestic labour and family life
  - Moralization of convenience food
  - Health and nutrition
  - Environment, sustainability and waste
  - Convenience as practice.
- Various other papers and a forthcoming book: *Reframing convenience food* (Palgrave-Macmillan).





# Convenience as social practice

- Focusing on:
  - *meanings* (how we ‘make sense’ of convenience food)
  - *practices* (such as shopping and cooking with which CF is associated)
  - the *embeddedness* of convenience foods (in routines and rhythms of everyday life)
  - *‘do-ability’* (practicality and cultural appropriateness)
- Convenience food is valued for the way it fits in with people’s busy working and domestic lives (‘meal solutions’ for time-pressed consumers)
- Not a separate category – frequently combined with other foods and ways of cooking
- Highly moralized within the gendered discourse of ‘feeding the family’, linked to a discourse of decline (in cooking and parenting skills)
- Its use is often accompanied by justification, apology and self-deprecating humour.



# Implications for policy and practice

- What can we learn from the commercial success of convenience food that might apply to healthier/more sustainable options?
- Understanding the consumption of convenience food as a mundane social practice (with its own logic and rationale) rather than taking a moralizing/judgmental/didactic approach
- Convenience as care: catering for different meal-times, culinary preferences, stocking up for unexpected visitors, reducing waste
- Change most likely at the level of social practice (institutions and infrastructure) rather than at individual level (attitudes and behaviour) -- 'consumer choice' as a limited framing.



# ‘Conveniencization’

- Useful to distinguish between:
  - ‘convenience food’ as a marketing category (specific kinds of food such as frozen pizza or ready-meals)
  - ‘convenient food’ which can include all kinds of food that save time and effort (including canteen food and meal boxes)
  - ‘conveniencization’ as the process through which some kinds of food, in some circumstances, come to be regarded as convenient.



# Thank you...

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