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# **Why Don't Parents Walk Their Talk? Parental Deviant Food Socialization Behavior within Families**

## **Abstract**

This study attempts to bring an original contribution to the understanding of how parents neutralize their feelings of guilt in performing deviant food socialization practices (e.g. offering unhealthy food to their children) using neutralization theory. The findings highlight how neutralization techniques help lessen parents' self-blame on negative displays of parenthood.

# Why Don't Parents Walk Their Talk? Parental Deviant Food Socialization Behaviors within Families

## Introduction

Why do parents socialize children on what they know they shouldn't be doing? Parents sometimes find it difficult to behave in accordance with the ideals of *good parenting*, particularly in the context of food socialization. Parents are considered to be the most powerful socialization agents for children (Moschis and Churchill, 1978; Dotson and Hyatt, 2005; Hunter-Jones, 2014) with parents playing a pervasive role in shaping children's consumption patterns (Kerrane, Bettany, and Hogg, 2014), especially food consumption habits (Nicklas et al., 2001). Given the global concern surrounding childhood obesity<sup>1</sup> (WHO, 2017) and recent calls for research that explore the role parents play in forming healthy family food socialization practices (Grier and Moore, 2012), it is timely to explore parental food socialization behaviors that may, eventually, contribute to obesity amongst children (Ayadi and Bree, 2010).

In this paper, we explore the *deviant* food socialization behaviors of a sample of parents, as food preparers, in the United Kingdom from October 2015 to June 2016, using multiple stages of qualitative data collection - existential phenomenological interviews, photo-elicitation exercises, and accompanied grocery shopping trips. We draw on theoretical tenants of neutralization theory and the techniques of neutralization to gain a better understanding of *how parents 'neutralize' their deviant food behaviors*, and show *how such deviant food behaviors can work to develop food habits*.

The findings are, thus, making major contributions to our understanding of the attitude-behavior gap, presented in deviant behaviour, among parents in food socialization/consumption context, as called for in previous studies (Moschis and Cox, 1989; Grier and Moore, 2012; Hoy and Childers, 2012), and the implications for parental deviant acts in unhealthy food to their children (even when they know that such actions violate the norms of 'good' parenting). Additionally, the findings presented in this paper are one of the first studies to apply neutralization theory to family's food consumption. Such theoretical contribution is responded to the call for extending the use of neutralization theory to other deviant consumption behaviors rather than ethical consumptions (Strutton, Vitell, and Pelton, 1994; Chatzidakis, Hibbert, and Smith, 2007; Harris and Daunt, 2011).

## Attitude-Behavior Gap, Deviant Consumer Behavior, and Neutralization Literature

The 'attitude-behavior' gap has been extensively studied in consumer behavior, particularly in relation to ethical consumption (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001; Elliot and Jankel-Elliot, 2003; Harrison et al., 2005). It is proposed that the attitudes of individuals are determined by personal values, moral norms, and internal ethics (Shaw and Shui, 2002; Carrington, Neville and Whitwell, 2010). Thus, the attitude-behavior gap may occur in behavior that deviates from social norms. It is noted that such gaps remain poorly understood and are under-researched, especially in the field of consumption (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001; Belk et al., 2005; Connolly and Shaw, 2006; Carrington, Neville and Whitwell, 2010).

The majority of studies in the consumption literature often link the attitude-behavior gap with organic or fair-trade products (Brunner, 2014; Hempel & Hamm, 2016) and environmental concerns (Atkinson and Kim, 2014). Prior studies exploring the attitude-behavior gap among parents have shown the existence of attitude-behavior inconsistencies among parents in providing food to their children (see, for example, Hughner and Maher,

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<sup>1</sup>, The World Health Organization (WHO) acknowledges childhood obesity as today's greatest health concern around the globe with over 42 million children worldwide under the age of five classified as obese (WHO, 2017).

2006; Gram, 2014). However, what is yet known is how parents alleviate their feelings of guilt associated with such discrepancies or ‘paradoxical’ behavior (Hoy and Childers, 2012, p. 569).

Behavior is considered to be ‘deviant’ when it deviates or does not adhere to social norms (Moschis and Cox, 1989). Although socially acceptable behaviors are considered norms, such behaviors may not be formally administered by law within society (Dootson et al. 2016). Thus, consumers often see deviant consumer behavior as logical from their own perspectives (Harris and Daunt 2011). Studies in consumer behavior suggest that much less is known about the rationalizations associated with performing deviant acts of consumption, despite the fact that such behavior is thought to be common (Fullerton and Punj, 1993, 2004; Harris and Daunt, 2011).

Neutralization theory is commonly used in the sociology of deviance (Minor, 1981; Maruna and Copes 2005) with Sykes and Matza (1957) outlining a range of neutralization techniques in their seminal study of juvenile delinquency. Five neutralization techniques are identified; (1) denial of responsibility, (2) denial of injury, (3) denial of victim, (4) condemning the condemners and (5) appeal to higher loyalties, which definitions of each technique found in the findings section.

Existing consumer studies have applied neutralization theory to a range of contexts, including *shoplifting* (Strutton et al., 1994), *consumer fraud* (Rosenbaum and Kuntze, 2003), *ethical consumption* (Strutton et al., 1997; Chatzidakis et al., 2007), *alcohol* and *cigarette* consumption, and *cannabis use* (Peretti-Watel et al., 2003; Piacentini, Chatzidakis, and Banister, 2012). However, neutralization theory has not been adequately studied, remains under-theorised, and has received limited attention in consumer behavior research (Strutton et al., 1994; Chatzidakis et al., 2007; Piacentini et al., 2012; Brunner, 2014). It is also noted that the studies of wider forms of deviant consumer behaviors are lacking and the understanding of consumers for justifying their norm-contradicting behaviors should be extended to a range of consumer activities (Chatzidakis et al., 2007; Harris and Daunt, 2011). Moschis and Cox (1989) highlight that *adopting a socialization approach in the study of deviant consumer behavior is imminently sensible* given that the acquisition of deviant behaviors (such as unhealthy eating practices) could be as a direct result of the consumer socialization process.

## Methodology

Thirty parents, who self-identified as the primary food preparer in their family, participated in this study. Informants were recruited through social media, nurseries and primary schools. Parents of younger children were recruited because they exert the greatest influence on children when they were born up until adolescence (Moore and Moschis, 1980). Multiple stages of data collection occurred, drawing on a photo-elicitation task, existential-phenomenological interview, and accompanied grocery-shopping trip. First, participants were asked to take photos of the food inside their kitchen cabinets, refrigerator, and the meals they prepared for their children during a one-week period. Such an approach to data collection has been employed within studies of consumption (Fournier, 1998; Harman and Cappellini, 2014, 2015). Then, participants were asked to talk about the photos they took at the beginning of an in-depth interview<sup>2</sup>. The descriptive information from the photos was used to identify any attitude-behavior gaps among the parents (Elliott and Jankel-Elliott, 2003). Each interview lasted between one and two hours, with the interview exploring topics such as how the food preparers make sure that their children eat healthy food and in what situations (if any) they allowed their children treats, capturing the justifications behind such actions. The interviews

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<sup>2</sup> The photographs from the photo diaries were used to helping stimulate discussion during the in-depth interviews, as utilised by others (see, for example, Elliott & Jankel-Elliott, 2003; Harman & Cappellini, 2014, 2015).

were conducted at the home of each participant, or at coffee shops or offices. Lastly, participants took part in an accompanied grocery-shopping trip (an observational interview, Belk et al., 2012), which lasted between thirty minutes to one hour. Multiple methods of qualitative data collection were utilized as it is believed to shed greater light on how consumers perform deviant acts and, in turn, helps to understand how they rationalize such actions (Gruber and Schlegelmilch 2014). The interviews were audio recorded, and procedures were taken to ensure the ethical credibility of the research project. Transcripts were transcribed verbatim, coded, and analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

## **Findings**

The findings offer an in-depth understanding of ‘deviant’ behavior practiced by parents and show how techniques of neutralization can successfully be applied to food socialization practices within the family, as called for by other researchers (Chatzidakis, et al., 2007; Harris and Daunt, 2011). Five neutralization techniques were found across our data, although, as reported by others (Chatzidakis et al., 2007; Piacentini et al., 2012; Brunner, 2014), certain techniques were more widespread. We find denial of responsibility and denial of injury have been employed the most, while denial of victim has been employed the least. Thus, the elicited family stories associated with four dominant neutralization techniques (denial of responsibility, denial of injury, condemning the condemners, and appeal to higher loyalty) will be discussed in turn. Illustrative quotes from the participants are offered in table 1.

### **1. *Parents feel they have limited control over their deviant food consumption practices***

Parents *denied their responsibility* because they feel that there are many forces beyond their control in their children’s food intake, resulting in their children consuming unhealthy food (Sykes and Matza, 1957) (“*It’s not my fault, I had no other choice*”). Most parents mentioned that when their child attends a friend’s party or house, or even when they are at school, children would be given sweets and other ‘unhealthy’ food. These are the situations which parents feel that they “can’t avoid”, and where they “don’t know what is given and have no control over it”.

Many participants identified themselves as being time-poor parents. Time-pressure is another constraint contemporary parents face in raising their family (Copelton 2007), especially given the rise in dual-income families. Participants often employed this technique when providing ready meals for their children. As such, they often denied there was anything wrong in giving ready meals to children because they lacked time. Also, many participants felt compelled to visit fast-food outlets, such as McDonald’s, as they felt they had no other choice, as they were spending time traveling/had work commitments.

### **2. *Parents feel that giving children some ‘treats’ does not do any real harm***

Here, *denial of injury*, parents did not deny their deviant behaviors (i.e. they recognised that they did offer unhealthy food to children *at times*), but they felt that their behavior did not really cause any great harm to their children (Sykes and Matza 1957) (“*what’s the big deal?*”). Parents reported that their children would get some treats for special occasions, such as birthdays or treat day. Although acknowledged their actions, participants feel that this is not harmful because they are only engaging in such deviant behavior *occasionally* (i.e. on designated treat days alone). Participants mentioned that their children would have their treat days every week, most often at the weekend.

Kate mentioned that ‘finger food’ at birthday parties is not healthy. But, she is fine with it (as (a) this is not a frequent occurrence; and (b) such food consumption occasionally falls outside her control, noting the relationship with the earlier neutralization technique). This signifies that she tends to identify herself as a ‘good’ parent through providing more healthy

food than unhealthy foods for her daughter. Such a notion is considered a way to display good parenting as parents are judged by the way that they follow social norms in providing healthy food for the family (Harman and Cappellini, 2014).

### **3. *Other parents and other children are performing the same deviant food behaviors***

For *condemning the condemners* (“everyone else does it”), parents attempt to shift attention away from their deviant acts towards the acts of those who condemn their deviant behaviors (e.g. other parents or other children) (Sykes and Matza 1957). Individuals rationalize their actions by asserting that others are doing worse and yet they are not caught (De Bock and Van Kenhove 2011). Parents mentioned that other parents would allow children to have sweets on special occasions. For example, Isabella remarked that giving children treats is what “other parents always do”. In addition, Joy’s opinion in table 1 provides a good example of how parents condemn other parents (i.e. those other parents have done worse). Moreover, parents also highlight that other children are eating food, which is worse than they provide.

### **4. *Children follow their friends and parents allow them to***

With *appeal to higher loyalty*, parents neutralize their deviant behaviors by signaling that what they did was for the good of their family, prioritizing their bond to the subculture or inner social group rather than to society as a whole (Sykes and Matza, 1957; Chatzidakis et al., 2007). Parents consider consuming finger food, sweets, and sugary drinks at parties or at social gatherings as normal and socially expected among other parents and other children within their personal networks.

Parents commented that it would be difficult to tell their children what to eat at such gatherings because their children see other children eating such unhealthy foods. Here, parents justify such unhealthy food consumption as they want their children to ‘fit in’, and not to be ostracized by their peers should they be denied unhealthy foods. Parents also commented that the reason their children want to go to McDonald’s is because they have seen other children going, and the parents did not want their children to feel like ‘the odd one out’ in denying them such visits.

## **Discussion**

Stories of ‘deviant’ parental food socialization practices demonstrate a clear gap between parents’ attitudes of *performing good parenting* (adhering to social norm in providing healthy food to their children) and the actual performance of ‘*deviant*’ parental acts. Parents tend to identify themselves as ‘good parents’ by adhering to norms of society in providing healthy food to their children with parents feeling ‘on display’ through the food they provide to their children (Harman and Cappellini, 2014; 2015). However, because of a range of factors (e.g. limited income, perceptions of being time ‘poor’) parents engage in ‘deviant’ food socialization behaviors in providing less healthy food to their children, and draw on neutralization techniques to justify doing so to protect their negative self-image (Chatzidakis et al., 2007; Copelton 2007). The findings, yet, suggest that parents sometimes perform deviant acts as they are in the best interests of their children (i.e. I allow unhealthy food because my children likes that food and everybody is doing it; my children will be socially excluded by their friends if I do not allow them to eat such food). Techniques of neutralization provide insight into how parents neutralize their feelings of guilt when undertaking ‘deviant’ food socialization practices *without changing their intended attitude*.

Although this study used a relatively homogenous sample, it contributes to our understanding of deviant parental food behaviors and shows that the theory of neutralization can be applied to various perspectives of deviant consumer behavior as previously calls for (Chatzidakis et al., 2007; Harris and Daunt, 2011). To the best of our knowledge, this is the

first study to explore deviant parental acts in the process of food. It extends our knowledge of parental attitude-behavior gaps, as called for in previous research (Grier and Moore, 2012; Hoy and Childers, 2012).

This paper offers opportunities for policymakers to counter the possibility of repeated deviant parental food behaviors (i.e. having *treat* days every week). Also, marketers could use such knowledge to implement strategies to tackle the childhood obesity problem; or to promote products/services that could prevent parents from situations where deviant food behavior, is likely to occur.

**Table 1:** Neutralization techniques in the context of deviant parental food socialization behavior

Technique of neutralization	Illustrative quote(s)
<p><b>1. Denial of Responsibility:</b> <i>Parents feel they have limited control over deviant food consumption practices</i></p>	<p>JANE: <i>That's the worst thing ever. It's very difficult to stop your children having sweets.</i> Yesterday my son went to a party, so he was given sweets. That's really difficult. How can I say you can't have that? So my daughter also got sweets from another party. So if somebody has a birthday at school often they [sweets] get given out when they come out of school.</p> <p>NATASHA: I use those <i>pre-cooked food once or twice a week</i>. Because it's convenient. So, at the moment I'm especially busy because my daughter is about to go to secondary school. So, as well as after school's activities, we are looking at senior schools. So, <i>we have no time in the evening. So, when I'm time pressured, it helps.</i></p>
<p><b>2. Denial of Injury:</b> <i>Parents feel that giving children some 'treats' does not do any real harm</i></p>	<p>JANE: Yesterday was my son's sweet day, so we go to the shops after school. He gets 70p and he can go and select some sweets and he knows that is once a week treat. And then occasionally he gets pocket money at the weekend. He might go and buy a chocolate bar or something like that. So <i>it's fine occasionally.</i></p> <p>REBECCA: When the <i>Advent Calendar last Christmas</i>, they get lots of biscuits and chocolate and things at all these Christmas events and he's kind of, every day, "Where's chocolate?" And you would be like no not now. And then he'd throw a tantrum. So <i>special occasions</i>, so like there was <i>Halloween</i> the other day and he had some chocolate because he went Trick or Treating with his cousins and <i>that's fine</i>. But just <i>save it for a party.</i></p> <p>WENDY: When we are out, I just <i>turn blind and let her enjoy her life and have whatever she wants</i>. When we are out, she sometimes drinks coke or lemonade or eats cakes. Of course, she doesn't have cake all the time. So, <i>occasionally I'd say that's okay.</i></p>
<p><b>3. Condemning the Condemners:</b> <i>Other parents and other children are performing the same deviant food behaviors</i></p>	<p>JOY: How I do it is quite highly rationed. But <i>my sister-in-law, she is worse than me</i>. She lets them have sweets twice a week. And for Halloween this year, she got this tiny little glow sticks that you can buy online. It's very tiny like cocktail sticks. So, apparently, it's really popular. She's also gotten Haribo for them. <i>You see when everybody does it.</i></p> <p>IZABELLA: For the birthday parties, all parents are thinking that they should prepare something very sophisticated. Often than not, the treats would be cakes and they are full of sugar on the top of them. <i>Everybody is doing this.</i></p> <p>KATE: We try to encourage her. <i>She probably could eat more fruits and veg than she does I think all the kids could</i> ((Laughs)). So, she seems to understand and <i>she's not too bad eater neither comparing to some kids</i>. Also, media doesn't affect her so much. But the media might affect probably other kids more.</p>
<p><b>4. Appeal to Higher Loyalty:</b> <i>Children follows their friends and parents allow them to</i></p>	<p>NATASHA: Going somewhere like McDonald's is not unheard of. And he's a small child and his friends do. So, it adds a social element to it. <i>He shouldn't feel that he couldn't go there</i>. I would go there because <i>he should be able to experience it and chat with his friends about it, like it's a normal thing to do.</i></p> <p>FRAN: I don't want to be a Victorian parent but I also don't – if I go a bit kind of, you must have this, that and the other; sometimes children can get quite unhappy if they feel they are being denied. <i>Sometimes their friends come and oh, I'm not allowed this and that. I don't want them to have that sort of feeling associated with food.</i></p> <p>SANDRA: It's ok because sometimes <i>they will see other kids eat something else that they might want to try</i>. We used to live close to McDonald and they saw other kids went. So, they asked 'Can we go to McDonald?'</p>



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