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Feeding the 'organic child': Mothering through ethical consumption

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Abstract

In this article, we examine the gendering of ethical food discourse by focusing on the ideal of the 'organic child'. Drawing from qualitative focus groups and interviews with Canadian mothers of various class backgrounds, we find that the organic child reflects the intersecting ideals of motherhood and ethical food discourse, whereby 'good' mothers are those who preserve their children's purity and protect the environment through conscientious food purchases. Women in our study express the desire to nurture the organic child, and feel responsible for protecting their children's purity. At the same time the organic child represents a gendered burden for women, our participants negotiate the ideal in complex ways that involve managing emotions and balancing the normative expectations of motherhood with pragmatic demands. The idealized figure of the organic child not only works ideologically to reinforce gendered notions of care-work, but also works to set a classed standard for good mothering that demands significant investments of economic and cultural capital. We argue that the organic child ideal reflects neoliberal expectations about childhood and maternal social and environmental responsibility by emphasizing mothers' individual responsibility for securing children's futures.

Keywords

childhood, consumption, care-work, motherhood, ethical food discourse, neoliberalism

The authors are listed alphabetically to reflect their equal participation in the writing of this article.

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Introduction

The rise of ethical food discourse is a prominent force shaping contemporary consumer cultures, as it suggests that more equitable, sustainable food systems can be developed through conscientious consumption. This discourse valorizes the personal shopping choices that are directed toward improving the public good alongside individual well-being, whether by choosing organic produce at farmers' markets or buying grass-fed beef from local butchers. Studies of ethical consumption have productively engaged with questions of culture and identity (Johnston and Baumann, 2010), race and class inequality (Guthman, 2003, 2008a; Johnston et al., 2011), and the political contradictions of market-based strategies for social change (Connolly and Prothero, 2008; Johnston and Cairns, 2012; Sassatelli and Davolio, 2010; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007).

Despite the growing scholarly interest in ethical consumption, little research has documented how ethical food discourse operates in the context of feeding the family – a responsibility that continues to fall disproportionately on the shoulders of women (Beagan et al., 2008; Bugge and Almas, 2006; Hook, 2010). In one of few studies addressing this oversight, Little et al. (2009) reveal the increased gendered labour required to incorporate local foods into the family diet. McIntyre and Rondeau raise similar concerns in their research with Canadian farm women, highlighting the stress that some women experience if they are unable to fulfill normative expectations about mothering through the provision of fresh, locally sourced foods (2011: 121). These studies point toward the need for greater research exploring how women negotiate the pressures to consume ethically through their food work and mothering practices.

This article examines the gendering of ethical food discourse by focusing on the figure of the 'organic child'. We use this term to capture an idealized notion of a 'pure' child that is kept safe from the harmful impurities of an industrialized food system. Our understanding of the organic child ideal emerged from our interviews with female consumers, and was most clearly articulated by a mother who proudly declared that her baby was '99.999% organic'. This ideal is also visible throughout the spaces where mothers are likely to shop for 'pure', healthy and organic food – spaces that carry product brands such as 'Babygenics' or 'OrganicKidz' and sell books like *The Organic Baby and Toddler Cookbook* (Vann and Razazan, 2011). Whole Foods Market (WFM), for example, promotes a line of organic products for the 'Whole Baby'. Their website emphasizes the parent's role in nurturing the organic child: 'When the time comes to introduce first foods, your baby's palate is a blank slate and his nutritional future is in your hands. No pressure!' (WFM, 2012). Mobilizing familiar ideals that position the child as the promise of the future (James et al., 1998), these marketing efforts encourage organic and ethical shopping to promote collective well-being through proper care for children. As we argue in this article, in feeding the organic child, mothers are deemed individually responsible for producing a healthy child *and* a healthy planet.

In this article, our focus is on mothers' experience with the figure of the organic child – how do they articulate this ideal, and relate to it through their consumption

habits, mothering practices and food work? How does this ideal obscure inequities, strains and tensions that shape mothers' everyday food work? More generally, we ask how the ideal of the organic child operates ideologically,¹ naturalizing and reproducing the idea of care-work as 'women's work', while appealing to contemporary notions of ethical consumption and commonsense understandings of childhood purity and mothers' responsibility to protect children. To address these questions, we draw from qualitative interviews and focus groups with female consumers to analyse how mothers negotiate the ideal of the organic child in their everyday food shopping practices. Reading our interview and focus group transcripts, we are attentive to how ethical food discourse combines with neoliberal constructions of childhood to produce the figure of the organic child who must be carefully cultivated through individual mothers' consumption practices.

Overall, our data suggests that women think about the organic child as an ideal they should strive towards, and they position themselves as individually responsible for producing this child, through the provision of 'safe', 'clean' food. Interviewees suggest that some level of negotiation with this ideal is an almost mandatory component of middle-class women's experience of shopping for and feeding children. We argue that the figure of the organic child is a powerfully classed and gendered cultural ideal; it has a material dimension that shapes mothers' consumption practices (e.g. buying organic baby food), as well as an ideological dimension that reinforces the idea of childhood as 'pure' and uncontaminated. Our focus groups and interviews show that women from diverse class backgrounds strive toward the organic child ideal, yet they also highlight the substantial resources this ideal demands, and the subsequent constraints placed on working-class and poor women. We argue that the cultural salience of the organic child ideal is due, in part, to its profound emotional consequences. Because this ideal resonates with commonsense notions of mothers as caring, protective and self-sacrificing, the mothers we spoke with found it difficult to detach from the organic child figure. Even so, we document instances of scepticism, critiques of its mandatory nature, and reflexive awareness of the impossibility of living up to this ideal, especially for women living with limited resources.

The article proceeds in three sections. We first discuss literatures on neoliberal constructions of childhood and ethical consumption, which together provide the theoretical building blocks for this article. We then describe our interview and focus group data. After establishing this research context, we present our findings, analysing how mothers engage with the ideal of the organic child through their consumption practices.

Mothering in a neoliberal era: Consuming to produce the precious child

We understand the emergence of the organic child as part of an historical continuation of the 'sacralization' of the child, from a figure of economic worth to one of emotional pricelessness (Zelizer, 1985). As a cultural figure, the child functions as a

sign or metaphor that reflects broader cultural and adult projections (Burman and Stacey, 2010: 231). Constructed through moralizing discourses of innocence and vulnerability, the precious child emerges as a dependent being in need of diligent care and protection (Meyer, 2007; Murphy, 2007).

The precious child is an incomplete project demanding constant efforts. In part, this is because childhood is collectively idealized as the natural starting point within narratives of individual development and social progress (Aries, 1962; Baird, 2008; Jenks, 1996). Seeing children as a project that is never 'finished', or 'becomings' who are never fully formed, the condition of childhood absorbs a multiplicity of adult projections. Children are identified with myriad cultural, physical, and social expectations and fears; these range from the gratification of high test scores, to the defeat of childhood obesity. The potentiality of childhood is full of promise, but is continually cast in relation to the possibility of failure, or unrealized potential (Casteñeda, 2002: 4). Motherhood exists dialectically with the figure of an evolving child, replete with potential; an idealized mother is one who takes up responsibility for 'the moral as well as physical guardians of the next generation' (Burman and Stacey, 2010: 229). While recent research has challenged narratives of childhood vulnerability by highlighting children's agency as social actors who co-construct their worlds (Holloway and Valentine, 2000; James et al., 1998; Qvortrup, 2005), the development of this agentic young subject remains enmeshed in relations of care (Cook, 2009). Thus, normative expectations of the 'good mother' are always defined in relation to constructions of childhood; mothers are commonly understood to be the primary guardians who foster and promote the child's potential (Lawler, 1999).

Ideas of children and childhood are not static constructions, but reflect broader social concerns at specific historical moments (James et al., 1998: 65). While the child has long been imbued with innocence and potential, investments in children assume a heightened significance within the contemporary context of economic and social uncertainty (Baird, 2008; Ruddick, 2003; Zivkovic et al., 2010). Cindi Katz demonstrates how neoliberal conceptions of responsibility demand 'the increasingly individualized production of children' (2008: 10), and points toward a host of practices whereby well-resourced parents contribute to national futures by investing in their children. Such discourses and practices ultimately serve to reproduce classed boundaries, as investments in the well-resourced child 'always already play out against the figuration of the child "at risk," and the specter of a wasted childhood' (Katz, 2008: 12). At the core of this neoliberal model of childhood is an individualizing rhetoric that positions families – and primarily mothers – as the private bearers of responsibility for the reproduction of collective futures (Zivkovic et al., 2010: 378). In this way, neoliberal discourses of childhood operate ideologically to enlist mothers in an endless array of 'strategies that strive for, and of course do not achieve, absolute control over childhood' (Katz, 2008: 14).

One of the primary means through which mothers strive to achieve such control is through consumption – the strategy most readily available amid neoliberal discourses of choice and individual responsibility. Cook argues that '[w]e cannot

'know' motherhood without 'knowing' the consumer/commercial contexts of mothers' lives and, by direct implication, the commercial lives and contexts of children and childhood' (2009: 318). Building on Cook's insights, we suggest that an important element of knowing motherhood – and by extension, coming to know oneself as mother – lies in the interplay between food shopping and constructions of the 'good' mother. Given the cultural significance of food within collective ideas about well-being, socialization and status (Bourdieu, 1984), as well as gendered expectations regarding the performance of appropriate food femininities (Cairns et al., 2010), the consumption practices associated with feeding children are an especially salient measure of 'good' mothering (Cook, 2009).

Ideas about 'goodness' assume heightened significance in ethical food discourse. Ethical food discourse relies on a 'win-win' narrative that links personal well-being to social and environmental improvement (Johnston, 2008; Johnston and Baumann, 2010: 140–153). While *certified* organic foods have a specific meaning, the term 'organic' is used by North American consumers² alongside the term 'healthy' to refer to foods that are considered pure, uncontaminated, and lacking the chemicals used in conventional industrial agriculture (e.g. Johnston and Baumann, 2010: 147–148; Johnston et al., 2012; Nie and Zepeda, 2011).³ Consumer perceptions of organic are dynamic and shifting, especially as organic becomes a relatively mainstream market concept,⁴ but it remains a key part of people's ideas of healthy, and sustainable products. Significantly, one of the constants in research on organic food consumption in various national settings is that women are its main supporters (e.g. Aguirre, 2007; Bellows et al., 2010; Essoussi and Zahaf, 2008; Gonzalez, 2009; Lea and Worsley, 2005; Lockie et al., 2002; Magnusson et al., 2001; McEachern et al., 2002; Sangkumchaliang and Huang, 2012).

Existing research has drawn attention to the classed assessments perpetuated through ethical food discourse (Guthman, 2003), but studies of ethical eating have yet to explore how ideas about doing 'good' by consuming 'good' food come to bear on idealized constructions of childhood and 'good' mothering. As we illustrate below, the organic child figure reflects the intersecting ideals of motherhood and alternative consumption, which work together to define good mothers as those who preserve their children's purity and protect the environment through conscientious food purchases. Moreover, the realm of the organic child is an important site where women both practically and emotionally negotiate neoliberal expectations about childhood and maternal social and environmental responsibility through their consumption practices, food work and intimate relationships with their children.

Research methods

Our analysis draws on a data set comprised of rich narratives obtained from focus groups and in-depth interviews with mothers in Toronto, Canada. In these settings, we asked participants to discuss food shopping and meal preparation, as well as to identify the priorities guiding their food choices. Focus groups allowed us to explore, through a moderated discussion, how women conceptualize their

responsibility to their children through food work, while interviews allowed us to examine this conceptualization more closely. Interview respondents were recruited through advertisements in grocery stores and parenting listservs; some low-income respondents were recruited with the assistance of community social workers. For focus groups, we accommodated both self-identified 'political eaters' (who view their food shopping practices as 'political' and procure their food at alternative venues like Community Supported Agriculture Shares or farmers' markets), as well as those who shop at 'conventional' grocery stores and do not claim to have a political orientation guiding their food choices. For interviews, we specifically recruited parents who had a responsibility for food shopping, and, again, accommodated self-identified political eaters who shop at alternative venues as well as parents who shop mainly at conventional grocery stores. Across both focus groups and interviews, over 90 percent of participants were women, and in this paper we draw primarily from the responses of the mothers ($N = 53$) in our sample.⁵

Focus groups were held at a participant's home and were comprised of that participant's friends and/or acquaintances. Groups consisted of four to six participants, and discussion was moderated by one or more of the authors. Focus groups lasted from 1.5 to 2 hours. Interviews were held in respondents' homes, or in a café or restaurant, lasted 1 to 2 hours, and were conducted by one of the authors. All focus groups and interview participants were asked to complete a short survey to record basic socio-demographic information.

We conducted 10 focus groups with a total of 28 mothers (39 women overall; 5 men) and conducted in-depth interviews with 25 mothers. In our interview sample, all 25 mothers had children under the age of 12 living at home, while the mothers in the focus group sample had children of various ages. Across both samples, all mothers were either single or partnered with men, although not all identified as heterosexual. Of the 28 mothers from the focus groups, 17 were middle-class, and 11 were working-class or poor. Of mothers from the interview sample, 14 were middle-class and 11 were working-class or poor. Class designations were made based on an interpretive reading that factored in participant's household income, education and occupational prestige (Gilbert, 2008; Goldthorpe et al., 1987; Lamont, 1992).

In both the focus groups and interviews, we started with broad questions to identify the basic priorities that guide respondents' food choices, and then used follow-up questions to ascertain what priorities guide food choices for children specifically. Typical follow-up questions asked respondents to comment on the importance of having local and certified organic foods in their diet and whether they had any specific concerns related to food shopping and preparing foods for children. Respondents were asked to reflect on their ability to meet these priorities, and when these priorities first became important to them.

All focus groups and interviews were digitally recorded and professionally transcribed. We then coded the transcripts to identify major themes. Through the coding process, we traced the emergence of the organic child in mothers' descriptions of their food shopping priorities and practices. Interview narratives

emphasized the purity of children, and the need for mothers' food shopping and feeding practices to safeguard that purity, while simultaneously supporting broad social and environmental goals. In the next section, we identify several distinct themes that characterize this narrative.

Findings: Feeding the organic child

The following analysis explores four themes related to mothers' pursuit of an organic child. (1) *Protecting purity*: The process of investing in the organic child is commonly initiated with pregnancy and becoming a mother. The women we spoke with describe protecting their children's purity through the provision of organic and healthy food, untainted by processing or harmful additives and chemicals. (2) *Feeding the future*: In addition to physical well-being, the organic child requires socialization into a healthy and ethical consumption habitus. Mothers' socialization efforts are viewed as necessary steps toward a healthy future, both for the child and the environment in which they will grow. (3) *Gendered labour/Emotional labour*: Interview and focus group narratives reveal the substantial gendered labour and emotional management involved in raising an organic child. (4) *Access and inequality*: Although many women do not have access to the resources required to sustain this ideal, structural inequities are obscured by classed constructions of the 'good' mother who 'chooses' to purchase pure food for the organic child. Women with limited resources were still conscious of the organic child ideal, and struggled to live up to it in myriad ways.

Protecting purity: The transition to motherhood

Almost all of the mothers in our interviews and focus groups spoke of how their entry into motherhood generated a new sense of accountability with regard to food, as they assumed responsibility for another person's well-being. Part of this transition was an awareness of the child's body as pure and subject to contamination by mothers' food choices. In Marie's words, a middle-class mother of two children: 'I felt so responsible and honoured at the same time that my daughter's first taste of food were things that I was providing for her and the fact that I got to sort of guide her palate.' The deep appreciation that Marie expresses toward feeding her daughter and shaping her eating habits evokes the image of the precious child who must be carefully monitored and respectfully cultivated. Later she explains, 'I look at my daughter and I think her little body is so tiny... the same amount of something toxic in her versus me will affect her completely differently.' Enveloped in narratives of childhood purity, the organic child is conceptualized as a fragile body in need of protection. Organic food consumption is then defined as a maternal responsibility necessary to preserve children's purity and potential, keeping them removed from dangerous, contaminating chemicals.

Mothers frequently spoke of how a new sense of maternal responsibility inspired them to begin buying organic foods. For Selena, a middle-class mother of a

two-year-old, this motivation began prior to her daughter's birth. 'From the time I got pregnant we got a bit more into spending the extra money to buy organic milk', she explained. Now that they have a young child, she and her partner are 'ready to shell out a bit more because we think of a little growing body and how much more sensitive [she is] to pesticides and that kind of thing'. Megan, who is also middle-class, described a similar shift toward organic consumption that accompanied her entry into motherhood: 'Since probably having my daughter... we've definitely tried to get more organics and been more aware of what's going into our foods and trying to eat, to make better choices as far as less hormones and organic dairy.' Maaren, a middle-class woman pregnant with her first child, reflected on her responsibility as a parent, 'especially when they are so little and their immune system develops... that's the foundation for the rest of their lives and so I think you can support that with yeah, as little chemicals as possible'. Maaren reflected on factors beyond her control – such as the type of food her future child may eat at daycare – but feels an obligation to 'try to do it as good as I can and to know as much as I can'. Maaren suggests that the development of her child's growing body rests primarily on her shoulders – a feeling commonly expressed by participants. Women often described the decision to purchase organic foods as an outcome of mothering, and explained that they did not prioritize organic consumption for themselves or their partners. Linda, a middle-class mother on maternity leave, admitted: 'I would have never bought organic before I had a baby.'

Mothers of diverse class backgrounds who buy organic food for their children often spoke about this consumption practice as a source of pride. This was primarily a middle-class practice, but not exclusively. Samantha, a working-class mother, happily stated that her son is '99.999 percent organic'. Samantha conveyed a sense of satisfaction that she has met nearly all of the requirements of the organic child ideal, and she understands this to be a significant achievement. She stressed the time and planning that it took for her to provide organic foods for her son, but described this work as 'enjoyable'. Tamara, who is middle-class, spoke of her decision to buy organic as something that all mothers in her social circle do: 'Everyone does organic. Like even if they're doing it in the jars it's all organic they start their kids with.' In other words, organic food constitutes a normative obligation perceived as a mandatory part of 'good' mothering. Buying organic was one way that she, as a 'very high anxiety mother' who 'wanted everything to be just perfect and just right' could gain control over her young daughter's development.

Some women identified a critical incident in their child's development that inspired a shift toward more careful consumption designed to protect their child from the perceived threat of toxins in the food system. During one focus group, Anne, a middle-class mother of three children, began to cry as she described how her infant daughter's health problems motivated a major overhaul of her family's feeding practices:

Anne: The issue I have in my house that I can't always solve is that I have a little one who has a chromosomal issue... she was a year and

believe it or not started growing a breast. Yeah, um, yeah so anyway we pulled everything from our system and we discovered that she can't have anything, right. So, I don't know why I'm crying. So, when it comes to meat, I try to buy as much organic as I can. I don't know why I'm crying.

Moderator: Did you want to take a break?

Anne: No, no it's fine . . . but yeah, I try to do as much raw as I can, no canned, nothing frozen, and just as natural as I can. No canned spaghetti sauce cause she just can't handle it.

Anne became visibly upset as she described the challenge of providing the right balance of foods for her daughter's health. Although she stated that her husband is supportive in this endeavour, her food narratives are punctuated by the pronoun 'I' – 'I try to buy as much organic as I can' – framing this task as a personal responsibility. As other focus group members offered their support, they suggested that perhaps good things will result:

Carl: So your child's condition has influenced your decisions for the whole family?

Anne: Absolutely.

Beth: Which in a way might be a good thing.

Anne: Yeah, oh ya, which is a great thing, but that's how we do it.

Daniella: Expensive.

Anne: It's very expensive. But it's either that or she . . .

Carl: There's no price for health though is there.

In an effort to console their friend, Carl and Beth highlighted the potential 'good' that may come of the increased feeding pressures Anne faces due to her daughter's health complications. In trying to redirect Anne's emotional distress in this way, they naturalize the ideal of the organic child as an ultimate good, regardless of the costs it may incur for mothers (or the evidence connecting food to specific health conditions). Significantly, the focus on maternal protection leaves little room for discussions about the emotional struggle, costs and hard work associated with the organic child ideal. Indeed, many women adopted narratives of sacrifice and selflessness by declaring an active willingness to compromise their own needs and desires in order to purchase the expensive organic ingredients that they thought were necessary for their children. As Moira, a poor stay-at-home mother stated: 'I would stop paying my phone bill before I start getting crappy food for my kid.'

While nearly all the women in our study spoke of a heightened awareness about food that accompanied their entry into motherhood, not all participants embraced the ideal of the organic child, and we saw scepticism particularly amongst participants who lacked the economic capital to fulfill the organic child ideal in their daily food work. Paige, who is raising her toddler on a very low income as a part-time Community Food Coordinator, spoke critically of the way expecting mothers are

pressured to regulate their eating during pregnancy. She recounted a line in a book that instructed, 'as a pregnant woman, every time you lift a fork to your mouth, you should think, "is this food good for my baby?"' Paige recalled the struggles she experienced with nausea during pregnancy, and said 'if you're constantly desperately trying to put something in your mouth [laughs], you don't want to be like, "is this the ideal, perfect food for my baby growing inside me?'" In the end, Paige came to the conclusion that 'you just have to do your best and not stress about it'.

Other women identified a gap between the ideals they associated with raising an organic child, and their own feeding practices. 'What I imagined I would do as a parent, and what I'm *actually* doing are, like, worlds apart', shared Rosita, who is poor and works part-time at a food co-op. When her son was born, she wanted to feed him a diet comprised exclusively of organic foods. Now that he is a toddler, other concerns dominate. 'If he's like "BANANAAA!" and I can't get to an organic shop or the one that's down the street here is closed because it's Sunday, and he's having a meltdown, then I'll go and get him a banana', she said with a laugh, adding 'and it won't be organic'. Rosita agrees with the idea of prioritizing organic food in order to protect her child's purity, but she believes such principles must be flexibly adapted within the context of everyday life. Thus, while she engages with the ideal of the organic child, her sense of pragmatism allows her to avoid a harsh condemnation of her mothering practices.

Feeding the future: Socializing children to be ethical consumers

Throughout women's narratives of feeding their children, we find that the organic child ideal extends beyond mere food consumption to also include socializing children into an ethical consumption habitus in order to promote healthy and sustainable futures. Sociology of childhood scholars document 'the seemingly logical alignment of childhood with futurity' (Krafft, 2008: 83) such that 'in any historical period, youth embody the collective anxieties of their society and its hopes for the future' (Flanagan, 2008: 149). While mothers, arguably, have always worried about their children's futures, we highlight the level of *personal* control contemporary mothers seek to have over their children's environments and futures, and suggest that this reinforces a neoliberal model of individual responsibility that is fundamental to discourses of ethical eating (Guthman, 2008b).

To prepare their children for the future, many women described ongoing efforts to socialize children into a healthy and ethical consumption habitus, involving knowledge of what constitutes 'good' food as well as an awareness of their food source. As Vicky, a middle-class mother with an adolescent daughter, explained, 'I try to buy things as close to the original form as possible... Because I want my daughter to learn where things come from.' Vicky contrasted the type of mindful eating that she attempts to foster in her daughter with the sense of ignorance that she associates with processed foods. 'I think it's the education, like setting examples for your kids, right? Like, knowing where your food comes from, what it looks like

in its original form. Like, my daughter knows what potatoes are. She wouldn't know what this package of stuff is that you add water [to].'

Similarly, other women spoke of a personal obligation to counter the messages of an industrial food system in which consumers are disconnected from food production. Cara, a middle-class mother of three, was horrified when her son declared: 'bacon comes from Whole Foods'. This motivated her to bring her children to farmers' markets so that they could develop a sense of connection to their food source and 'start from a respectful point of view'. Cara wants her children to appreciate that when they eat meat, they are eating an animal, so her family eats the entire animal, including the organ meats, in order to 'be respectful of it'. Cara believes her feeding responsibilities extend beyond the provision of healthy and humanely raised foods, as she also feels an obligation to foster ethical consumption habits in her children. Audrey, a middle-class mother with two children, expressed a similar view, stating that her primary commitment is 'just about teaching my kids you know, what are ethical choices. It matters where we buy things from, it matters how much we consume.'

In these narratives, the ideal of the organic child takes shape within a context of broader discourses of ethical consumption, wherein individual shopping practices are constructed as tools for creating social and ecological change. This was part of a larger vision of creating a more sustainable environment through careful consumption choices, a position commonly (but not exclusively) articulated by middle-class participants. In this way, the organic child ideal operates ideologically to reinforce the 'win-win' logic of ethical eating discourse, as well as the neoliberal downloading of environmental responsibility onto the individual (Guthman, 2008b; Johnston, 2008; Johnston and Cairns, 2012). In the words of Tracy, a working-class mother, 'the goal is to try and protect him now and future-wise and his surrounding environment and that's about it'. Some women drew an explicit connection between mothering and environmentalism, saying that they now feel a greater responsibility toward future ecological sustainability. Kerri, a middle-class woman, described a shift in perspective since becoming pregnant, and joked: 'I can only imagine how much more of an environmentalist I'm going to become after I have the baby.' Comparing herself to her parents and grandparents who did not have to worry about the environmental impact of their food shopping, she observed how, 'my child's generation is going to be the one to suffer the consequences... And hopefully they'll be the generation along with mine who will start turning these things around.'

The organic child ideal invites mothers to consume in ways that will not only nourish healthy and ethical consumers of the future, but also improve the ecological and social context in which they live. At the same time, the organic child draws from, and reinforces a neoliberal model of childhood that positions mothers as individually responsible for ensuring their child's development as healthy and ethically-minded consumers. While children's fathers were sometimes described as helpful assistants, mothers spoke of themselves as primarily responsible for the careful planning and preparation required to nourish and protect the organic

child. Interviewees commonly framed this personal responsibility as part of a consumer-driven model of social change. Marie, for example, declared that: 'We as individuals have a responsibility to say "no, I'm not going to buy these products filled with pesticides or filled with chemicals".' Noting that food consumption is one of the few areas that 'we can control', Marie concluded that 'it is up to us to make those decisions'.

A sense of control over children's food socialization seemed to grow more problematic for mothers as their children grew older. Some participants with older children revealed how children's eating habits are shaped by factors outside the mother's individual control. Sadie, a working-class and highly environmentally motivated participant, described her frustration with her teenage children's food choices. Even though she laughed as she told anecdotes about their acts of defiance (e.g. sneaking Coca Cola into the house), she also conveyed how upsetting this pattern was for her: 'I was always trying to make ethical, healthy decisions before I had kids, but now that ya, I'm responsible for the health and well-being of two kids who actively resist [laughs]. And they're out there eating, you know, nasty burgers and things, it's just like, agh!'

Gendered labour and emotional management

In this section, we examine how the ideal of the organic child demands particular kinds of mothering practices, with a focus on the gendered and emotional labour described by our participants. Throughout our interviews and focus groups, we were struck by the extensive amount of time, energy and resources women devoted to purchasing and preparing foods for their children. Many participants described complicated shopping routines that involved researching food options online, then visiting numerous locations – grocery stores, farmers' markets, speciality shops – and carefully investigating products by reading labels or inquiring with vendors. As Audrey stated, 'finding out sort of where everything comes from is quite time consuming and involves a lot more work'.

What's more, the extensive work required to feed the organic child was often characterized as *gendered* labour. Not only did women in our study report doing more of this labour, but the work itself was commonly linked to femininity and the care-work associated with mothering (DeVault, 1991). Kerri, for example, attributed this gendered division of labour to how 'women are generally the caretakers of the family and do a lot of the purchasing of the food, so I think they're more aware of all these issues'. Similarly, Marie joked about men's and women's different levels of concern when it comes to children's food choices. She provided the example of choosing between Goldfish crackers and organic Cheddar Bunnies: 'it's funny because I don't think the dads really care. They're like it's a fish or it's a bunny, who cares? It's a cracker. My kid likes it, I'll let them eat it. For the moms it's like no, no. I want the *organic* Cheddar Bunnies.' Even when fathers shared similar concerns about food, their orientation was not framed as part of care-work and responsibility for children. For instance, Zahra, a middle-class mother with

a nine-year-old daughter, explained that while her husband is generally food aware, 'he's come about it by being interested in the environment' which, she notes, is 'different from myself, who's reading about hormones in girls'. Moira explains the gendered distinction this way:

Sadly, most families that I know, the mothers are the ones that mainly do the shopping or the childcare, cooking and that stuff. So they pay the most attention. I think most of the men that I know in that circle, though, they are still concerned about it. They just don't spend as much time looking into it and doing as much research as the mothers do.

Moira voices a perspective that is widely supported in our research. Namely, while fathers may assume supportive roles in relation to food shopping, the difficult labour involved in researching and planning family food decisions continues to be gendered as primarily women's responsibility, and is conceptualized as an extension of their skills and interest in caring for the family, and protecting children.

The responsibility of feeding the organic child is not only gendered labour, but also creates work for women on an emotional level. More specifically, the ideals of the organic child were not simply integrated into the cognitive processes of day-to-day care-work, but were also interwoven with positive and negative emotions as part of women's self-evaluation of their maternal competence. While some mothers took up the responsibilities for raising an organic child enthusiastically, and incorporated them as a source of identity and pride as a caring mother, others expressed feeling emotionally 'overwhelmed' by the weight of these commitments. In these cases, the organic child ideal was associated with anxiety, stress and guilt. Cara, a middle-class mother with three children, described the process of reading labels at the grocery store as 'very frustrating and gross. And a little sad.' In addition to worrying about potentially harmful chemical additives in food products, the financial burden of seeking out 'pure' foods for her children further contributes to Cara's stress: 'it causes me a ton of anxiety because I think oh, you don't want to run yourself into the ground financially for clean food but what do you have if you don't have your health?' Cara's anxiety and confusion resonates with other consumer culture research suggesting that the marketplace of commodities for children is overwhelming for women transitioning to motherhood and exacerbates an existing feeling of vulnerability (Voice Group, 2010a). The strategies used to market children's commodities draw on mothering ideologies that signal to mothers that one's product selections will symbolize her commitment to good and cautious mothering (Voice Group, 2010a, 2010b).

In addition to the weight of responsibility for raising an organic child, women also felt stress about the complex calculations involved in selecting a 'safe' or 'healthy' product. Many women felt as though they were bombarded with competing information from friends, family, corporations and food media, creating confusion about what information they could trust. This confusion was felt even by middle-class women with a post-secondary education – a group with greater

resources with which to negotiate complex health information. For example, Tamara lamented, 'you'll read conflicting stuff about organic too, right, about how some of it doesn't really matter and some of it matters more depending on the fruit or the vegetable'. Another middle-class mother, Lucia, referred to the pressure to regulate her feeding practices 'from the market, from the television, from your friends, from your community'. Although she has increased her consumption of organic meat since becoming a mother, Lucia also noted how the practices associated with maintaining the organic child ideal compromise her sense of autonomy: 'This controlling behaviour, I have a little bit of suspicion about it', she says. 'So, I always take everything with a grain of salt because I don't want to be controlled.' For Matilda, a middle-class mother with two teens, negotiating 'complicated' food choices is a unique characteristic of mothering in a contemporary context (marked by neoliberal uncertainty and complex modern risks): 'I don't think my mom sat there and thought, "is it local, is it organic, is it ethical, am I supporting factory farms?" I mean, she just went and bought food.'

The emotional component of complex decision making was intensified in situations where women felt compelled to justify their concerns to others. Marie tells the story of reading ingredient lists on various brands of formula in the grocery store, and explains 'because I was comparing four products it was really frustrating and hard to keep track of it all'. Marie describes how her husband became impatient, and asked 'why are you taking so long to read through these?' Similarly, other participants spoke of having to justify the cost of organic products to partners who saw them as an unnecessary expense. Throughout these narratives of negotiating food decisions with partners, we observe how women actively balance competing emotions: they must manage feelings of frustration and anxiety about their child's well-being, as well as the fear of evaluations by others should they be perceived as 'crazy' or 'obsessed'. Tamara, for instance, explained that when she raises issues of health and food ethics at home, her husband 'just thinks that I take it to the nth degree . . . He thinks I'm a little bit out there, for sure. But he tolerates it really well . . . it's very much an attitude of "okay, here we go again", kind of rolling the eyes.' Yet, even as Tamara's partner views her level of concern to be excessive, she continues to hold primary responsibility for family care-work: 'I think he does leave most of the child-rearing decisions because he knows that I'm the one who sits and does the research and so I guess he figures I'm making informed decisions.'

Tamara's story illuminates how maintaining the organic child involves devoting just the right amount of time, money, knowledge and emotion to nourishing children, without becoming a 'crazy' mother obsessed with her child's eating. Some participants actively distanced themselves from this characterization of maternal excess, and strove to achieve a moderate approach in daily food practices. For example, Robin, a middle-class mother with a two-year-old son, explained that 'we do eat a lot of organic foods but not exclusively and certainly not sort of dogmatically'; we 'just have a really healthy diet at home and try to model something that's pretty balanced and reasonable', but I try to 'not make myself crazy with it'.

Inequality and access

Despite the appeal of buying the very best for one's child, the idealized figure of the organic child is not readily attained, and requires significant investments of economic and cultural capital. The organic child ideal works ideologically to reinforce gendered notions of care-work, and establishes a standard for good mothering that is widely recognized, but not universally attainable. By naturalizing a set of privileged consumption practices, the organic child ideal suggests that 'good' mothers can and *should* feed their children the purest and most ethical ingredients. This individualized consumer framing works to obscure the structural constraints that poor and working-class women face while feeding their children, and thus positions mothers' struggles as a product of personal deficiency, rather than a product of structural inequality.

Several mothers highlighted a gap between the organic child ideal and the shopping practices that are financially manageable on a daily basis. Megan stated: 'I would love to be buying all organic meats and always buy free-range eggs and stuff, but I have to balance our financial well-being with that priority.' Middle-class women, like Megan, sometimes articulated this struggle, but the organic child ideal clearly placed more constraints on women with limited financial resources, and these women frequently mentioned this as a source of tension in daily shopping practices. Tara, a poor and single-mother living on Disability Insurance, proudly shared that her teenage son 'eats a lot of vegetables and fruit,' but noted that she 'can't afford a lot of the organics and that kind of stuff'. Karen, whose family is facing bankruptcy, related this challenge to the goal of teaching children to be ethical consumers: 'if money were no object I would buy organic and . . . I would try to live green, be environmentally conscious as well as energy-conscious and just try to pass that along to the kids'. Women of various class brackets seemed to regard the organic child as a kind of gold standard of good mothering, including those who don't have the resources to prioritize organics, thereby reflecting a shared evaluation of organic consumption as a cultural ideal for maternal food work. This was the case for Manuela, a real estate agent with two young children, who also cares for her husbands' elderly parents. Due to the sheer volume of food required to sustain this large family, she 'can't even afford to think organic'. Despite the practical necessity of this decision, Manuela expressed concern regarding the potential outcomes for her children, and worried aloud that 'my children's health will pay the price'. Manuela implied that her children's well-being may suffer as a result of her decision not to feed them organic food, and thus experiences guilt about a decision that is based on financial necessity.

Even with the significant challenges posed by economic constraints, some poor and working-class mothers found ways to adopt elements of the organic child ideal in their feeding practices. Since losing her job six months ago, Deb, who is working-class, has been forced to carefully manage her food choices, and said 'I have to admit I'm very cheap about buying organic'. While she must forego regular organic purchases for her seven-year-old son, Deb compensates by working to foster a

sense of connection with their food. Together, they've planted a garden in their backyard, and regularly visit their community farmers' market. Thus, mothers who are feeding children in the context of class constraints may still adopt aspects of the organic child ideal that are accessible to them (See also Johnston et al., 2011: 310–311).

While poor and working-class women were clearly more affected by financial constraints limiting organic child practices in daily life, they were not the only respondents to raise issues of access. Some middle-class mothers expressed awareness of their class position and the relative ease through which they can access ethical and organic foods. Audrey compared her own middle-class privileges to the low-income women she met through a community drop-in programme. She commented that:

While it is possible, I think, to eat well on a limited income it's much, much harder. Probably also you don't really have the luxury of going around the city looking for food in different places, you know? . . . If you live in a neighbourhood where you don't have access to health food stores . . . then probably you are not able to buy those things as readily and certainly you might not see why you should spend what little money you have on buying a box of organic cereal when you can buy a box of cereal from Kellogg's that's so much cheaper.

Audrey was not the only participant to acknowledge how her privileged class position facilitated culturally valued shopping practices, suggesting that for some mothers, the classed project of raising an organic child and engaging with ethical consumer discourse can be a reflexive process (See also Johnston and Szabo, 2011). That is, some women consume in ways that align with the organic child ideal, but also reflexively engage with its underlying assumptions. This was evident in one focus group with three young middle-class mothers who adopted some aspects of the organic child ideal, but rejected others. All three women purchase hormone-free meat and some organic produce in the interest of protecting their toddlers' developing bodies, and described ongoing efforts to educate their children about healthy and ethical eating habits. At the same time, these women were conscious of how the organic child ideal can work to reinforce class boundaries, and serve as a source of distinction. For example, Tammy criticized the fact that 'the way you feed your child is almost like a status symbol'. She noted that 'a lot of people can't afford to feed their children that way and so I try not to wear that like a badge of honour'. Tammy maintains an ambivalent relationship to the organic child, demonstrating that even as women feel pressured by this ideal, they may also resist being drawn into a system of status distinctions that they are uncomfortable reproducing.

Conclusion

Women have long held the responsibility of nurturing the precious child (Murphy, 2000), and food work is a central component of this concern. Ethical food

discourse constructs consumers as agents of change, and we have shown that mothers have the added responsibility of consuming ethically to protect their children, preserve the environment, and socialize future ethical eaters. The power of these discourses to stoke a sense of consumer agency is substantial, but the actual potential for transforming food systems is limited when politics is undertaken exclusively within the market (Johnston, 2008; Johnston and Cairns, 2012; Thompson, 2004). In a neoliberal context where mothers are positioned as individually responsible for ensuring their child's optimal development, the idealized figure of the organic child is a product of mothering practices, 'organic/local/natural' food markets and a discourse of ethical consumption. Engaging with this ideal, women in our study described taking primary responsibility for feeding the organic child as a project that nourishes their children's growing bodies, protects them from the harmful risks associated with the industrial food system, and socializes them into a life of healthy and ethical eating practices.

Our analysis of mothers' engagement with the organic child ideal makes two major contributions to critical literatures on mothering, food and (ethical) consumption. *First*, we make an empirical contribution to studies of ethical eating by exploring gendered dynamics in relation to food work and mothering. Our analysis reveals the gendered labour required to research, purchase and prepare 'good' food for the organic child, as well as the emotional labour involved in fulfilling these expectations without being constructed as an overly anxious mother. In examining these gendered dynamics, we also show how the ability of women to engage with the organic child ideal in their everyday food practices is constrained by access to resources, time and knowledge.

Second, we make a theoretical contribution to critical investigations of neoliberal ideology by moving beyond dichotomous accounts of accepting or rejecting neoliberal discourse. Instead, we show how the figure of the organic child operates ideologically to cement women's understanding of their individual responsibility for care-work, while also appealing to hegemonic understandings of motherhood as fundamentally involving care and protection. These common-sense notions are not abstract thoughts, but exist at an emotional level. While the maternal pursuit of an organic child undoubtedly reproduces and naturalizes the neoliberal ideals of individualism and consumerism, these practices and ideals rest upon maternal values of love, care, and responsibility.⁶ We take a feminist perspective (Jaggar, 1989) that resists pathologizing these values as the 'fuel' reinforcing neoliberal ideologies of individualized, commodity solutions to social and ecological problems. Rather, our analysis showcases the ambivalence and reflexivity in women's negotiations with the figure of the organic child. Some of the women in our study articulated a conflicted relationship to the organic child, embracing aspects of this ideal, yet questioning others. Nevertheless, most of the women we spoke with remained compelled by individualized narratives of maternal responsibility. These narratives generated a sense of empowerment and control, as well as powerful feelings of guilt and anxiety – feelings that made it nearly impossible for women to completely detach from

the ideal of the organic child in their lived experiences with mothering and food work.

The potential to change the food system through food commodity choices is up for debate, as we have noted in other work (Johnston, 2008; Johnston and Cairns, 2012). To move this debate forward, it seems critical to avoid binary positions about women consumers as maternal-heroes or neoliberal dupes, and further investigate how care-work, emotion, and consumption decisions are intertwined in daily shopping habits and food work routines – and how this works differently for women and men in a post-feminist age. While it is intellectually important to appreciate the complexity of shopping decisions, it also seems politically important for future research to remain fixed on the larger question of neoliberalism, considering whether a classed project of raising organic children works to obscure highly privileged ideals of childrearing, as well as systematic environmental issues plaguing our commodity and energy-intensive lifestyles.

Notes

1. We treat the organic child not as a static, unitary ‘ideology’, but as an idealized figure that involves multiple ideological *processes* where power inequities are obscured or naturalized. We identify how ideological processes naturalize and legitimize ‘ideas in pursuit of dominant interests’, and pay particular attention to the negotiation that happens between individual subjects and dominant cultural constructions (Fegan, 1996: 184).
2. For perceptions of organic food outside North America see, for example, Aarset et al. (2004) (EU cross-national); Ahmad and Juhdi (2010) (Malaysia); Janssen and Hamm (2012) (EU cross-national); Krystallis and Chryssohoidis (2005) (Greece); Magnusson et al. (2001) (Sweden); Sirieix et al., (2011) and Thogersen and Zhou (2012) (China); Roitner-Schobesberger et al. (2008) and Sangkumchaliang and Huang (2012) (Thailand).
3. For reasons of space, we deliberately bracket complex issues about organic certification, the role of organics in the ethical food sector, the criticism that it has been co-opted by large-scale industrial agriculture, and its expansion into multiple global markets. For a scholarly account of corporate organics in California, see Guthman (2004); for a journalistic account of the rise of Big Organics, see Pollan (2006: 134–184); and Fromartz (2006). For a politicized nutrition perspective on the ‘organic industrial complex’, see Nestle (2006: 34–55).
4. Research outside North America replicates the idea that consumers associate ‘organic’ with ‘healthy’ (Aguirre, 2007; Ahmad and Juhdi, 2010; Gonzalez, 2009; La Trobe, 2001; Lea and Worsley, 2005; Magnusson et al., 2001; McEachern et al., 2002; Sangkumchaliang and Huang, 2012; Sirieix et al., 2011; Thogersen and Zhou, 2012), but not universally (Aarset et al., 2004).
5. When analysing focus group data, we considered the interactions and discussions among all of the participants (i.e. mothers, men and women without children) to help inform our understanding of the broader social salience of the ‘organic child’ ideal, but paid particular attention to the statements made by mothers.
6. As Miller has argued, feelings of love are not only essential to understanding much of contemporary consumption experiences, but they are often excised from scholarly analyses of consumption (1998).

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