

Imagined foodways and rejected biopedagogies: Rural children's perspectives of rural foodways

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Funding information

The Norwegian Research Council

Abstract

Rural residency is an independent risk factor for being overweight, but little is known about why this is so. The purpose of our study was to gain insight into what Norwegian rural children say about a rural diet in comparison to an urban one. Child-friendly methods were used. We found a discrepancy between what the children said they eat – traditional, ‘healthy’ foods, and what they ate – largely ultra-processed foods. We explored this by using the frameworks of imagined foodways and biopedagogies. Their imagined foodways were rooted in notions of ‘traditional food’, connected to surrounding nature and a history of farming and hunting. Urban people were perceived as eating an inferior diet of very unhealthy and ultra-processed foods of which they do not know the origin of. As a result, the children rejected specific health- and nutrition recommendations that were incompatible with their notions of traditional foods, leading to a more calorie dense diet than their urban counterparts. Our research adds to knowledge on what role a rural diet can play on the prevalence of overweight in rural areas, and how biopedagogies can be recontextualized within different cultural fields.

KEYWORDS

food and diet, health and well-being, participation, children

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INTRODUCTION

Obesity is one of the most serious public health challenges of the 21st century (WHO, 2022). The prevalence of obesity in children and young people has almost doubled since 1980 (Ng et al., 2014). Estimates show that one in three children is overweight or obese in Europe (WHO, 2022). Although it is a widespread notion that urbanization is one of the most important drivers of the global rise in obesity, research shows that more than 55% of the global rise in mean BMI between 1985 and 2017 was due to increases in BMI in rural areas (Bixby et al., 2019). This is also true for Norway, where overweight and obesity are more prevalent in rural municipalities (Øvrebø et al., 2021), but little is known why this is so. Several explanations have been put forward. For example, it has been argued that people in rural areas often have lower income and educational levels than people in urban areas, which is correlated with unhealthy lifestyles (Mekonnen et al., 2021). Others have speculated that in rural areas, body image differs from urban areas, that rural settings have culture-bound eating patterns, that is 'country cooking' characterized by large portions and calory-rich food, and that there have been changes in the nature of physical farm work and that the increase in car use has contributed to obesity (Befort et al., 2012; Biehl et al., 2013; Heggem & Zahl-Thanem, 2021). In these discussions, it is important to hear the voices of those affected. The aim of this study was to explore Norwegian rural children's perspectives on their diet and analyse how this relates to culture, identity and tradition in their everyday life to gain more insight into what role a rural diet might play in the prevalence of overweight and obesity among rural children in Norway. To do so, we involved children living in rural areas in Norway as co-researchers to explore their perspectives on their diets and how they learn about food and cooking.

Until recently, most studies contributing to our understanding of rural childhoods as well as research on determinants for the development of childhood obesity have tended to take an 'adult-centric' approach (Matthews et al., 2000). However, current studies have emphasized the views of children and young people on their rural experience (e.g. Powell et al., 2013). Still, rural children's points of view regarding their health and well-being as well as children's perspectives on rural diets are under-researched and undertheorized (Scheer, 2019). The same is true for research on how the globalization of food affects people cross-culturally (Lamalice et al., 2020). Gaining insight into children's perspectives might help identify plausible and context-specific aspects of the environment that affect the development of overweight and obesity among children (Salmon & Timpero, 2007).

In this article, we present findings from a study with 40 children aged 11–12. We applied child-friendly participatory methods often used within childhood studies for exploring their point of view(s). Our research shows that the children used notions of traditional rural food to communicate their rural identity. We also found differences between what the children said they were eating—traditional 'healthy' rural foods—and what they actually ate—largely modern and processed foods. We suggest that the children's notion of eating 'healthy rural food' is founded in notions of rural 'imagined foodways' rather than reality, that is what they actually eat. The children's notion of imagined foodways, we argue, might also act as a barrier to acknowledging and embracing health authorities' obesity-related messages, which may complicate the treatment and prevention of child obesity in rural areas.

BIOPEDAGOGIES AND THE NOTION OF ‘IMAGINED FOODWAYS’

In this article, we draw on the frameworks of biopedagogies and ‘imagined foodways’ to explore how the children’s diet is related to culture and tradition in their everyday lives. Biopedagogies is a critical sociological framework based on how the so-called ‘obesity epidemic’ has created pedagogical practices or ‘instructions’ that are aimed at providing the population with knowledge about obesity-related health risks (Wright, 2009). Such practices or instructions may, for example, be put forward by public health authorities or other important actors in children’s lives like school nurses or teachers (Wright, 2009). Researchers within the biopedagogical approach claim that such practices and instructions act as normalizing and regulating and that they place individuals under constant surveillance on ‘healthy living’ (Wright, 2009). Within this framework, researchers are not occupied with critical analysis of the obesity epidemic as a social construction, but instead try to understand how biopedagogical messages and instructions (or ‘discourses’) are recontextualized within different cultural and social fields, and how they affect notions of the body and how to live one’s life (Wright, 2009). The claim is that with increased knowledge about obesity-related risks, people will start self-monitoring regarding ‘staying active’ and ‘eating healthy’ and that such social meanings can become inscribed in people’s bodies and offer a way ‘to understand themselves, change themselves and take action to change others and their environment’ (Wright, 2009, p. 2). In other words, biopedagogical instructions can affect peoples’ subjectivities and identities (Wright, 2009).

In our research, we found that the children rejected certain biopedagogical messages because they are seen as ‘urban’. They used such messages for communicating the difference between rural and urban foodways and for displaying rural identity and rural residency as a better place to live (and eat). As we will describe, their discourses were based on notions of ‘a rural idyll’, that is a place where you live ‘the good life’ (Halfacree, 1993; Rye, 2006), claiming to eat ‘healthier’ by consuming locally sourced foods. This should be understood as a collective struggle for rural (food) identity in an increasingly globalized world (and food market).

As mentioned, the children’s discourses about their rural diet stood in stark contrast to what we found when mapping their actual diet. This finding is in line with research by Lamalice et al. (2020) who studied the spatial and social representations of contemporary foodways of the Nunacimmiut, a rural population of 89% Inuit living in Quebec, Canada. As with the Nunacimmiut, we found a discrepancy between what the children claimed to eat and what food they actually ate—largely ultra-processed foods, a risk factor for the development of overweight and obesity (Askari et al., 2020). To further explore this finding, we combine the framework of biopedagogies with the notion of ‘imagined foodways’ (Lamalice et al., 2020).

The notion of imagined foodways builds on the sociological concepts of ‘imagined communities’ and ‘foodways’ and is a concept that helps explain cultural and territorial gaps between actual and imagined dietary patterns in a rural population (Lamalice et al., 2020). The concept of ‘imagined communities’ was developed by Anderson (1991) to explain how people see themselves as members of a nation or communities based on imagined rather than experienced similarities. This corresponds with the changes in defining rurality within the social sciences, inspired by the cultural turn, as *production of meaning*, and ‘rather than asking what rurality is, the pivotal question has become: how do actors socially construct their rurality?’ (Rye, 2006, p. 409). In a similar way, ‘foodways’ connect people through the consumption of food, which then comes to represent people’s shared experiences of cultural identity and history (Long, 2001, Wilson, 2006, Vallianatos & Raine, 2008, Sutton, 2008, Cañas Bottos & Plasil, 2017). Foodways

is understood as encompassing ‘the extended, dynamic network of activities surrounding the procurement, preservation, preparation, presentation, performance and consumption of food’ (Lamalice et al., 2020). Building on Anderson (1991), Lamalice et al. (2020) argue that ‘imagination is an important source of community’ (Ibid.: 3), connecting people across time and space, and that *imagined foodways* ‘correspond to food-related practices among various members of a population that emerge through their representations and geographical imaginary’ (Ibid.:3). Food provenance, that is knowing where food was grown, caught or raised, has changed dramatically with the entry of commercial foods worldwide (Ibid.). Still, the children’s imaginary foodways seem to rely on representations of a closeness to nature and a history of farming and hunting. In contrast, they perceive urban people to eat ‘unhealthy’, ‘global’ and ultra-processed foods of which they do not know the origin. Lamalice et al. (2020) suggest that studying the gap between such imagined and actual foodways can offer important knowledge on the consequences of the rapid nutritional transition that has taken place in the last decades.

Our findings suggest that the rural children ate a more calorie-dense diet than urban children due to a combination of a traditional rural *and* an industrial urban diet, thereby adding insights into how cultural conceptions of food might affect food intake and the prevalence of overweight and obesity in rural areas. In this way, our findings add to the biopedagogical literature, which tends to focus on the individual level alone. Instead, we focus on a structural level, showing how diet-related biopedagogical messages—or in this case also the rejection of certain messages—may be used for maintaining and displaying rural identity as means for collective representations of rural foodways. This finding is in line with how scholars within the framework point to how biopedagogical messages can be recontextualized within different cultural and social fields (Wright, 2009).

METHODOLOGICAL AND ANALYTICAL APPROACH

This article is based on data from a larger study; The prevention and treatment of child obesity in rural settings in Norway. One of the work packages focused on gaining insight into children’s perspectives on how a rural setting affects their physical activity, mental health and diet. Sixth graders (119 children, aged 11–12 years of age) from seven schools in two different rural municipalities in Mid-Norway, one coastal and one inland, participated in a full-day workshop. A total of 40 children explored the theme of diet. Six graders were recruited as they can be considered as ‘twens’, meaning they are residing between the age groups ‘children’ and ‘teenagers’ (Sørensen, 2015). We believed that they could have rich experiences from which to draw from family, school, social and online life.

In line with childhood studies, we used child-friendly participatory methods to explore the children’s views on a rural diet. Within this approach, researchers strive to do research with, rather than on children (Moss et al., 2005). Child-friendly methods are both an approach and perspective as well as a methodological tool for stimulating children’s participation in the creation of their own life and environment (Moss et al., 2005). Methods were developed in collaboration with 10 Master’s students during a course titled ‘Experts in Teamwork’ at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology. The students received lectures about important topics relating to public health and a crash course in childhood studies including participatory methods that are commonly used within this approach. Supervised by the research team, four methods were developed. The first involved warming up exercises for both children and Master’s students. These exercises were specifically outlined to try to minimize the power imbalance between the

child participants and the adult Master's students and to actively involve the children in problem-solving (Punch, 2002): a name game to learn each other's names, a 'knot game' to tune in on problem-solving and a diet preference game set the stage for the workshop theme.

The second participatory method was a 'refrigerator task'. During this task, the children were divided into four groups; two of these were assigned to fill a refrigerator for a typical urban family, and two for a typical rural family. The urban/rural dividing line is found to be an important line of differences used in the process of constructing identity and conceptions of the rural (Rye, 2006). In the refrigerator task, we, therefore, asked them to see the rural diet up against an urban diet. The children were given a big sketch of an empty fridge as well as pictures of different food items and were asked to draw missing food items if need be. After finishing, the children had a brief and informal presentation of their urban or rural refrigerator and a discussion of similarities and differences between the two. This task was aimed at providing insights into the children's conceptions of urban and rural diet(s) as well as what food items the children were used to seeing in the refrigerator in their home.

The third method was called 'word cloud'. The children were given post-it notes and asked to fill out one for each person (for example parents or grandparents) or actors (like food courses at school or specific social media) involved in teaching them about food. All post-it notes were put on a board followed by a discussion. A word cloud was made of the words that were mentioned the most times during the discussion.

The fourth method was 'the food wheel'. The children were handed out individual food wheels (a drawing of a 24-h dial) and asked to try to recall and register their food intake last Thursday and Saturday. On their food wheels, the children could register when they ate meals and details about their meals (breakfast, dinner, lunch, supper or snack, including drinks). With the goal that the children would not become too self-conscious towards registering unhealthy foods, the Master's students showed a sample wheel consisting of both healthy and unhealthy foods they had eaten last Thursday and Saturday before the children started filling in their own. Finally, they discussed the children's different food wheels.

The Master's students were responsible for the implementation of the workshops. For each group of children, the Master's students had chosen a student moderator. The other students were responsible for logistics, answering questions the children might have, and asking the children relevant follow-up questions (as did the moderator). In collaboration with the researchers, the students developed back-up questions associated with the various exercises. These questions were not asked systematically since we had instructed the students about the importance to 'follow the lead of the children' and ask them relevant questions, allowing for natural conversations to take place. Two members of the research group, a sociologist and anthropologist with extensive experience in writing ethnographic data, observed and took field notes during workshops.

Our data consisted of the material produced by the children and ethnographic field notes produced by the researchers. When analysing the data, we used multiple modes of data and focused on the potential relationships between them (Heydon et al., 2016). Thematic analysis was used for analysing data (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Guest et al., 2012). This involved familiarizing ourselves with the data by repeatedly reading the field notes and viewing and discussing the children's materials. This was followed by a *coding phase*. Data from field notes were then categorized according to patterns of meaning relevant to our research question. After coding the entire data set, we collated the code labels and compiled the relevant segments of data for each code. This was followed by a process of *generating initial themes* by trying to identify shared patterned meaning across the data set by compiling clusters of codes that seemed to share a core idea or concept relating to our research question. In the next phase of analysing

the data, we *reviewed and developed themes* as well as *refined, defined and named themes* by going back to the full dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Main themes were then defined as ‘Dichotomies urban/rural’, ‘Knowledge about food’ and ‘The food wheel’. We also developed subthemes for each overarching theme in line with the applied thematic analysis by Guest et al. (2012) (see Table 1):

Guidelines for research ethics in the social sciences and humanities (NESH, 2021) were applied for this study. Based on written information about the study to parents and children, passive informed consent was obtained from parents. Children were also informed verbally about the project by their teacher and that opting out would not lead to negative consequences. They also got verbal information about the project on the day of the workshop and that they could opt out at any time, to which they had to give verbal consent. Empirical data was recorded by trained ethnographers in written form and no identifiable information about the children was written down. All the participatory activities were group based, and the focus was not on collecting individual children’s perspectives. No pictures of children or audio recordings were taken.

Results and analysis

The aim of our study was to explore Norwegian rural children’s perspectives on their diet and analyse how this relates to culture, identity, and tradition in their everyday life. In the next section, we present the data according to the three main participatory methods used during the workshops: the refrigerator task, the word cloud and the food wheel.

The refrigerator task: Urban is the future, rural is the past

During the refrigerator task, the children were told to stack two fridges with groceries they considered typical for families in urban versus rural settings. In their discussions during the task, we noticed that the children repeatedly associated the urban refrigerator with something modern, while the rural with the traditional (the past). This modern–traditional dichotomy seemed to be the main way for them to communicate urban versus rural differences. This is in accordance with previous research that suggests that lay people seem to employ a rural/urban dichotomy and other word pairs that attempt to capture the essence of rurality and urbanity, without misgivings or ambivalence (Rye, 2006). In the children’s discourses, we identified the use of several related sub-dichotomies: ‘fast food’ versus ‘slow food’, ‘light food products’ versus ‘real food products’ and ‘messy fridges’ versus ‘tidy fridges’. The urban fridges

TABLE 1 Themes and subthemes.

Dichotomies of urban/rural	Knowledge about food	The food wheel
Notions of rural food	Actors	Foods Thursday
Notions of urban food	Dishes taught/learned	Foods Saturday
Body image	Learning outcome	Notions about diet
	Time spent on cooking	Actual stated diet
	Cooking skills	

represented ‘modern times’, being stacked with fast food and light products; furthermore, they were perceived as ‘messy’ inside. The rural fridges represented the past—something ‘traditional’ and ‘old fashioned’ by containing slow food and ‘real’ food products as well as being ‘tidy’ (Table 2).

The children’s notion of urban as modern and rural as traditional is especially visible in the conversation quoted below when a group of children were trying to conclude a discussion around differences between their rural and urban fridge:

Child 1: “If we are, let’s say 1996, they are 2040”.

(Silence)

Child 2: “But that is okay, isn’t it?”

Child 1: Yes, that’s what I’m saying!”

The meaning of the word ‘we’ in this context refers to rural children, while ‘they’ refers to urban children, and the content of the rural fridge is connected to the past (year 1996), while the urban is connected to the future (year 2040). Connecting rural fridges with tradition was also noticeable when the children stacked the rural fridge: They tended to fill it with food items signifying ‘slow cooking’ or ‘slow foods’ such as gravlax (a traditional Nordic salmon dish cured with a combination of salt and sugar), sodd (a traditional Norwegian soup made with cooked mutton and meatballs made with lamb or beef), dark bread, cream, dairy butter, potatoes, eggs, cakes and waffles (in case of unexpected visits by family, friends or neighbours), milk from the tank at the farm, and ‘lots of meat, we eat lots of meat, for example real cooked ham or elk from hunting’. In contrast, the children tended to fill the urban fridges with international dishes like sushi and falafel and other takeaway dishes, many ultra-processed foods, chicken fillet, energy drinks and new soda brands, all of them signifying ‘modern’ and fast foods. They connected such food and food products to urban settings due to ‘easier access to grocery shops’ and claimed that urban shops had ‘more products to choose from’.

The connection of food to urban settings was also made through time spent on cooking: ‘There is a lot of fast-food in the cities’, ‘...they do it (eat fast food) because they want to get it done quickly’, ‘they don’t make food from scratch in the cities’, ‘city people are a bit lazy’. The perception of city people as lazy and not preparing food from scratch was contrary to their perception of ‘the rural way’ for making food, that is that people cook from scratch. This was exemplified, among other things, in a discussion about potatoes, which are a main ingredient in the traditional Norwegian diet: ‘City folk don’t eat a lot of potatoes, it is too time consuming to make’. They also stated that ‘city folk eat ready-baked bread, while we (rural folk) eat whole wheat bread’, implying that they make their own bread.

The children’s notions of urban (modern) versus rural (traditional) food habits were also connected to the use of light products in urban areas and ‘real’ food products in rural areas. ‘I don’t think city folk use real sour cream, but light sour cream’. ‘Real’ food products were considered commodities like meat, that is often meat butchered at the farm or obtained through hunting.

TABLE 2 Urban/rural dichotomies.

Modern	Traditional
Fast food	Slow food
Light food products	‘Real’ food products
Messy fridges	Tidy fridges

They also talked about milk, cream and sour cream, and they seemed to agree that such foods should be as little processed as possible: 'In the countryside, we drink milk straight from the milk tank'. A group of children also stated that they should put a picture of ice cream (made from real cream) in the rural fridge, due to how 'farmers are tired after doing their duties', indicating that the children thought they needed extra calories after performing hard physical work at the farm. Another illustrating example of the children's notions of 'real food' in rural settings is this discussion about butter:

Child 1: "We need butter in the fridge"... (picking up a picture of Brelett, a butter made from vegetable fat).

Child 2: "No, not that one. We need *real* man's butter" (i.e. butter made from cream).

The children also talked about 'messy' and 'dirty' fridges in urban areas, in opposition to 'tidy' and 'clean' fridges in rural areas: 'They have messy fridges. They come from the city; they do not bother to clean'. They also stated it was 'easier to make the content of the rural than the urban fridge' (i.e. a 'clean' fridge). This was also visible in the food items they chose for the urban fridges, which was 'a little bit of everything', compared to rural fridges. The children also considered the urban fridges to contain 'very unhealthy food'.

Our findings show that the children associate rural fridges (and diet) with 'traditional' food, preferably obtained through local farming or hunting and foods good for 'slow cooking'. Urban 'modern' fridges were described as 'dirty', 'unhealthy' and 'full of fast food'. Rural fridges, on the other hand, were described as 'clean' and containing 'healthy' foods. Such perceived dichotomous differences were also linked to differences in how rural versus urban people lived their lives: The children's discourses also reveal that they perceive urban people not to know where their food comes from, claiming that city people are 'lazy', 'in a hurry', make 'fast food' and buy their food at grocery stores.

Our findings suggest that the children did not agree with certain biopedagogical messages put forward by the Norwegian Directorate of Health: that people should eat less red meat and more fish, eat less candy and drink less sugary drinks, that one should use oil and margarine instead of butter and eat lean rather than fatty dairy products. Instead, the children communicated eating 'real man's butter', red meat (no fish) and 'real' (no light) products. This indicates that the children rejected specific biopedagogical messages in favour of their rural (food) identity and ways of living. As we will see in the following word cloud task, the children's discourses during the word cloud task further support our finding on how the children use food to communicate their rural (food) identity.

The word cloud: Where do the children learn about food and cooking?

The aim of the word cloud was to gain more insight into the children's sources of knowledge when it comes to food and cooking. But who teaches the children about food and 'eating healthy'? Research has shown that in general, parents are not good at recognizing overweight or underweight in their children (Júlíusson et al., 2011). In addition, we know that teachers with high formal competence in the subject *Food and Health* teach better quality based on healthy weight content (Bottolfs, 2020). In other words, the mediator of knowledge has great significance. During the 'word cloud' activity, the children were given post-it notes and were asked to fill out one for each person or actor involved in teaching them about food. This task was followed by a discussion

among the children. On their post-it notes, the children had registered ‘mother’ and ‘school’ as the most important actors in educating them about food. Regarding school, the children repeatedly wrote down and talked about the national compulsory subject *Food and Health*. This is a subject aimed at teaching children the relationship between diet and health: it promotes public health, food and interest in the diversity of foods and meal customs in Norwegian society and aims at helping children implement a healthy diet (Norwegian Directorate for Education and training, 2020). The children shared that during these classes they were taught ‘to make food from recipes, and then we eat it’. When we asked the children living in the inland municipality what kind of food they made during these classes, several responded that they ‘made a lot of cakes’. This might be related to the fact that cake baking is something unusual and exciting, which the children may remember better than making ‘ordinary’ food dishes. However, this over-representation of cake baking might also suggest that baking cakes are understood by the teacher as an important rural tradition for rural children to learn, which is in line with research concluding that food traditions for social gatherings are important for the rural identity and for the maintenance of the rural community (Heggem & Zahl-Thanem, 2021). We found this focus on locally important food also in the workshop in the coastal municipality. Here the main industry is fishing, and the children stated that they learned ‘how to make fish burgers and different fish dishes’.

Regarding the subject of *Food and Health*, some children stated that they ‘learned a lot’ during these classes, but some also stated that they quickly forgot what they had learned. When asked if they were taught about nutrition, the children got a bit flustered and answered in vague terms, and our general impression was that they were more concerned about sharing what food dishes they made, rather than what they had learned about nutrition. This corresponds with the fact that rural areas often have unskilled teachers who, as mentioned earlier, focus less on healthy diets and are overweight in their teaching (Bottolfs, 2020).

The children were also asked whether they liked to cook in general. Several responded yes, but only a few raised their hands when asked if they were helping with the cooking at home. In general, they stated that they did not want to be more involved in cooking at home, whether they normally were helping or not. This might suggest that the Norwegian rural tradition to involve (especially young) girls in cooking at an early age to give them cooking skills as adults (Heggem & Zahl-Thanem, 2021) is fading. From the task, it was clear that mothers had the biggest role alongside the subject of *Food and Health* to teach the children about food. All children had noted ‘mother’ on their post-it note. The children attending the workshop in the inland municipality elaborated that they, for example, were taught by their mothers how to make elk tenderloin. They stated that the fathers did the hunting and the mothers the cooking. Again, the children emphasized local food traditions and access to ‘real food’ (obtained by hunting) when elaborating on the mothers’ teachings about food. This supports our findings from the refrigerator task on how the children use food to communicate their rural (food) identity and to distance themselves from urban people and ways of living (and eating). One child explained it like this ‘We run outside and hunt (for food), you guys hunt (for food) in the city’.

The children from the coastal municipality, however, did not specify what their mother taught them about cooking. One would think that they might highlight learning how to make fish dishes (like during the subject *Food and Health*), but instead, they talked about eating cakes, steaks and ‘klæbbsoup’ (a traditional soup). This is also in line with the insight we obtained during the refrigerator task, where the children were asked whether there are foods that are typical for their rural area, to which one of the children replied that ‘there is a lot of meat’. We found that this puzzling since the fish industry in this municipality has existed since 1947 but we were informed that it was not possible to buy any local fresh fish at grocery shops.

Furthermore, the children mentioned grandmothers, aunts and uncles, dads, friends, television and commercials and social media on their post-it notes. Still, the children did not elaborate on their role(s) in teaching them about food. They did, however, discuss and reflect on the role of social media. The children shared that they often were exposed to food-related advertisements and pictures on Instagram and other social media. An interesting observation was that the children linked this kind of advertising to body image. They discussed 'typical' bodies used in these commercials and described them as 'fitness models'. This body image was something they clearly distanced themselves from: 'When I look at YouTube, these fitness commercials are popping up all the time. It is ugly'. Several of the children then stated that they did 'not want that kind of body'. This might suggest that rural children have a different body image, allowing for a greater variety of body shapes and sizes compared to urban ones (Walseth & Tidslevold, 2019).

To sum up, the children again displayed their conceptions of rural foodways in their discourses, highlighting cake baking and the making of local traditional food dishes when talking about who teaches them about food. Speaking of the subject of *Food and Health* as the main source of learning about food, the children were mostly concerned with sharing information about how they learned to make traditional dishes. The school plays an active role in creating and maintaining local imagined foodways by teaching the children how to make traditional dishes. However, when asked about what they had learned about nutrition, that is biopedagogical messages about food, which is mandatory content in *Food and Health* in Norway, the children were flustered and did not reply. When recalling what they had learned about food in school, the children focused more on the transfer of foodways and food culture than on biopedagogical messages about food. When talking about their parents' role in teaching them how to cook, the children highlighted the role of the mother in teaching them how to cook traditional dishes, and when talking about their father, they talked about hunting. Here again, the role of tradition in learning about food is highlighted rather than learning about nutrition and healthy food. There was a discrepancy in our findings related to the question of whether the children were involved in cooking at home. Only a few replied that they were helping, and the children also stated that they did not want to be more involved. As mentioned, this might suggest that involving children, especially girls, in cooking is a fading practice. In earlier times, mothers were the main source of teaching their children, or at least their daughters, about cooking. This might also indicate a change in rural food practices towards more urban ones as we will also see in the 'the food wheel'.

The food wheel

The aim of the food wheel was to gain detailed insight into the children's diet(s). All children were asked to fill out two different food wheels for what they had eaten last Thursday and Saturday. The children recorded both the hour of the day and the content of their meals and snacks. Even though many children stated that they found it difficult to remember what they had eaten, we found some similarities when analysing their food wheels. For example, few children ate breakfast before school, especially the children living in the coastal municipality. We also found that many ate potato chips and other snacks in between meals, also on weekdays. On Saturdays, which is the day of the week in Norway where children traditionally are 'allowed' to eat sweets, the children only registered that they ate breakfast, dinner and snacks (no other meals).

We gained additional information about the children's diet(s) during their discussions about their food wheels. Initially, the children had clear ideas about what *should* be eaten on a Thursday versus a Saturday: sweets and candy were associated with Saturdays, whereas Thursdays were

associated with 'everyday food'. On the weekends, they started to eat beef and tenderloin. This reflects the Norwegian tradition of eating moderately on weekdays and more abundantly on weekends. However, when looking closely at their wheels, the children discovered that they often ate potato chips, sweets, or other snacks during the week. When asked about the number of candies they were allowed to eat, they responded:

Child 1: My parents say to me that I should not fill the candy bag to the top (which in that case would hold 3 kilos, about 11 000 calories).

Child 2: I save my candy so I can eat it throughout the week.

Child 3: My stomach often hurts when I eat too much (candy).

Child 4: I can eat candy whenever I want to. In fact, there is not much difference between weekdays and weekends.

Most children seemed to agree with this last statement. This suggests that many of the children ate a lot of snacks during the week, even though they initially reproduced 'the Norwegian way' (or biopedagogies) of eating sweets only on Saturdays. To further explore their intake of foods with high sugar content, the children were asked whether there were rules regarding sweets or soda at school. They said that they were not allowed to bring chocolate but stated that 'some do anyways'. Furthermore, some children told us that even though they could not normally bring soda to school, they drank soda at home every day. During the workshop, we also observed that many children drank a lot of ice tea (which often has high sugar content). Many also had brought huge lunches, consisting for example of a large roll of white bread with ham and cheese.

In one of the municipalities, the children were asked how often they ate frozen ready-made pizza, even though no one had registered pizza on their food wheels. Four children replied that they hardly ever ate pizza, one child claimed to eat pizza once a week, but the rest of the children (15 children) told us that they ate pizza 2–3 times a week. Many also stated that they ate pizza when going to a local restaurant. Tacos were also mentioned as a favourite dish by many during their discussions, even though this dish was missing from all food wheels.

The children were also asked if they ate dessert every day. First, they stated that this was only done 'occasionally', but this led to a discussion amongst the children about the (rural) practice of eating cakes and pastries:

Child 1: My mom sometimes bakes cakes during weekends.

Child 2: But your mom bakes all the time!

Child 1: (Grinning).

Child 3: My grandmother bakes constantly. She has two, no *four* freezers full!

Child 4: If I want something good (to eat), I go to my grandparents.

Many shared how they often visited their grandmother and that she often served them something sweet. 'Grandmother has cake'. 'My grandmother has pancake batter in the fridge that we can make pancakes from'. 'I get buns or waffles from grandma'. 'Dad sometimes brings stuff from grandma because she bakes all the time'. It seems that grandmothers were generally associated with giving sweet treats to the children.

During the food wheel task, it became clear that there was a discrepancy between what the children presented as their eating habits and what they actually ate. Especially when seen in connection to the two other tasks, we conclude that there is a difference between the imaginary

foodways of the children and their day-to-day reality. As we will present in the section below, the children's imaginary foodways were used to maintain and/or strengthen their rural identity. This involves a rejection of certain biopedagogical messages because these are seen as belonging to the urban sphere.

Discussion and concluding remarks

In this study, we explored Norwegian rural children's perspectives of how their diet connects to local culture and tradition and how it is part of their social construction of reality. In line with childhood studies, which focus on the importance of conducting research with children, we used child-friendly methods for exploring the children's views.

Our findings show that the children's discourses about rural food largely displayed imagined, rather than actual foodways, and that the children used food to create a rural identity that is distinct from a modern, urban one. Their imaginary foodways were based on conceptions of rural traditions of food provenance in rural areas in Norway, that is food obtained by hunting or farming. The children claimed this was 'good' and 'healthy' food. This image of what is good food corresponds with that of wider Norwegian society. According to Amilien (2003), Norwegians think of good food as either traditional or natural or, even better, both. By claiming that their food came from natural sources, obtained and produced in a traditional way, these children set themselves apart from urban people who eat 'modern' and processed foods, or foods that Fischler (1988: 287) calls "unidentified edible objects," devoid of origin or history, without respectable past or identity'. Urban food was considered inferior to their own. The imaginary good and healthy foodways of the children also included 'real products', which often are higher in fat and calories, and which they saw as typical for their diet and as better than 'light products'. This combination of natural (hunted) and traditional (butter rather than margarine; slow food rather than fast food; sod rather than pizza) made up the imaginary foodway of these children, which they utilized to make them truly 'Norwegian', with a healthier and better lifestyle than their urban counterparts.

However, these children, not surprisingly, have been exposed to global shifts in food, where industrially produced food sold in supermarkets has replaced food from activities on the land (Lamalice et al., 2020) and where ultra-processed rather than self-preserved foods have become the norm. Therefore, to fit their imaginary foodways, we found that the children downplayed their intake of modern, processed, fast food. The consumption of pizza, tacos, snacks, and sodas was not registered during the participatory tasks, but ethnographic observation of the children's conversations relating to the tasks revealed that ultra-processed foods formed a larger part of the children's diet than they initially acknowledged. This downplaying of the consumption of modern, 'urban' food and the over-representation of natural and traditional food in the imagination of their diet suggest that the children used food to maintain their rural identity and to distance themselves from the dominant urban population that "encroaches" their rural idyll and imaginary foodways. Food was used to maintain and strengthen identity and continuity as a group, an imagined rural community in opposition to the urban majority.

Together with global shifts in food, rural children have also been exposed to related biopedagogical discourses of food. In particular, they embraced the permeating biopedagogical discourse on 'healthy' versus 'unhealthy' food. However, the foods that are understood as 'healthy' are interpreted through the lenses of local rural food culture and traditions. This can explain why the children reject light products and claim they belong to an urban diet, as they are viewed as 'modern' and 'processed'. This shows that biopedagogies are not passively internalized and that

biopedagogical messages can affect individual and cultural notions of the body and the self in different ways.

Our research adds to the theoretical framework of biopedagogies by highlighting how biopedagogical messages are recontextualized according to different cultural and social fields (Wright, 2009). There are important insights to be gained when looking at biopedagogies through the gaze of imagined foodways and by acknowledging the mechanisms that are at work when minority groups are building on food and diet to maintain their identity. First, researchers should acknowledge that biopedagogical messages might produce a diversity of outcomes depending on the receiving social and cultural groups—including rejection of health and nutrition recommendations. Secondly, one should be aware that biopedagogical messages might be perceived as an attack on rural identity and way of life. This can undermine the work of local healthcare workers and their efforts to treat and prevent childhood obesity. Therefore, we call for a more dynamic and contextualized health policy regarding child obesity that takes rural culture and experience into account. Guidelines for prevention and treatment of overweight and obesity should also be based ‘on rural terms’, that is based on the rural environment in which the child/children live and focus on the positive aspects of rural living. Instead, national guidelines focus on achieving ‘the ideal eater’ without taking social context, social norms and processes of meaning making into account (Bergman et al., 2020). Incorporating more experience-based knowledge, increasing research on rural foodways and taking rural children’s perspectives into consideration can lead to more efficient prevention as well as treatment of obesity for rural children.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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How to cite this article: Ersfjord, E. M. I., Plasil, T., & Heggem, R. (2023). Imagined foodways and rejected biopedagogies: Rural children's perspectives of rural foodways. *Children & Society*, 00, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12765>