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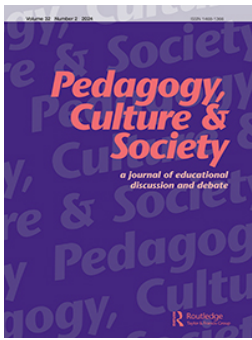
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# “Can we add a little sugar?” the contradictory discourses around sweet foods in Swedish home economics

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## ABSTRACT

Sweet foods occupy an ambiguous position in many people’s diets, perhaps especially for children and adolescents. The twin expectation that they both covet and limit their intake can create a dilemma not only in the home, but also in the school subject Home Economics (HE), which among other themes has a focus on food and health. In this study, we explored how Discourses on sweet foods were formed, reproduced, and challenged during 26 lessons in northern Sweden. Overall, sweet foods were constructed as desirable but also as unhealthy, disgusting, and unnecessary. They were used as a form of capital where ownership, distribution, and fairness were important, and students could mark friendships by sharing and gifting. Conversely, they could also use sweet foods to police, ridicule, question, or punish each other. Conflicts could arise around less-than-perfect results and students could withhold sweet foods from each other as a form of social rejection. Vague limits to intake placed responsibility for intake on the students themselves. We suggest that a contextualisation of the social, cultural, and health aspects of sweet foods in HE might help students acquire a more holistic Discourse of sweet foods and mitigate their social weaponisation.

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Food sociology; home economics; health; discourse analysis; sweet foods

## Introduction

In the western world, sugar and sweet foods occupy an ambiguous position in many people’s diet. Historically, sugar was seen as a luxury item with medicinal properties, but over time it has transformed into a cheap and widely available substance. This has lowered its status and associated it with the criticised food habits of the working class (Germov and Williams 2008; Darmon and Drewnowski 2008; Mintz 1986). It is connected to caries and type II diabetes (Basu et al. 2013; Moynihan and Kelly 2014; Te Morenga, Mallard, and Mann 2013), and guilt about eating too much can negatively affect well-being (Kuijter and Boyce 2014). Sweet foods are also seen as fattening, unhealthy, and even addictive (Ahmed, Guillem, and Vandaele 2013; Malik et al. 2013; Westwater, Fletcher, and Ziauddeen 2016). On the other hand, sweet foods are also associated with

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celebration, love, and friendship (Lupton 1996; McCorkindale 1992; Wright, Nancarrow, and Kwok 2001). A dessert traditionally marks the end of a meal (Douglas 1972), cakes and sweets make valued gifts, and Swedish *fika* (coffee or tea with a sandwich or something sweet) is a popular way of building and upholding relationships (Morley et al. 2018).

These contradictory aspects are perhaps even more salient for children and adolescents who are more or less expected to covet sweets, snacks, and 'junk food'. Historically in Sweden, sweets were limited to Saturdays, but over time their consumption has increased and spread to become an everyday occurrence. When Nordic children grow up and gain independence, they tend to spend their pocket money on sweets, and eventually on fast food (SyLOW and Holm 2009). Young people can be seen as uncool if they eat physically healthy food, and snacking is subject to considerable peer influence (Stead et al. 2011; Nørgaard, Nørgaard Hansen, and Grunert 2013). This highlights the prominence of social relations to young people's well-being, and points to the potential for ridicule or exclusion if they eat 'wrong'. It has even been argued that sweets are a part of children's distinctive food culture (Ludvigsen and Scott 2009). This culture is upheld by both children and adults, making it difficult for children to choose healthy food since it is not viewed as in-group defining (cf Oyserman, Smith, and Elmore 2014). Although many adults attempt to limit children's intake of sugar, both in the home and at school/day care, they also tend to use sweet foods to reward, bribe, and comfort them (Albon 2005; Lupton 1996; Rylatt and Cartwright 2016). In a study on low-income mothers (Chen 2016), participants claimed not to give their children sugary foods even as the contents of their shopping baskets and cupboards contradicted this. Confronted with the paradox, mothers dismissed those sugary foods as 'treats', which meant they were exceptions to the no-sugar rule and not part of the ordinary, healthy diet. Thus, children are both discouraged from eating sweet foods and encouraged to covet them.

Such contradictions can create a dilemma in the school subject home economics (HE). In Sweden, HE is mandatory for students between eleven and 16 years of age, and the syllabus prescribes a focus on food and health during all cooking and baking activities (NAE National Agency for Education 2011a). Since a large national population-based survey among young Swedish people (10 to 17 years old) has shown that half the respondents consumed more added sugar than the recommended dietary allowance and that consumption of fruits and vegetables was low (Warensjö Lemming et al. 2018), HE education might be expected to provide an incentive for healthier habits. Indeed, HE teachers tend to view the subject as a way of compensating for unhealthy food habits in the home (Höijer, Hjälmeskog, and Fjellström 2011), but this is not always easy to accomplish. Students typically ask to bake something sweet (Pettersson 2007), and sweet baking is common in the subject (Granberg 2018; Bohm 2022). Although 'empty calories' are constructed as unhealthy and no desserts or pastries are included in images of healthy meals in many HE textbooks, they do occur in the recipe sections (Flising 2015; Sjöholm et al. 2012). This may be due to the cultural importance of sweet foods, especially since culture forms a part of the HE curriculum (NAE 2011a). However, the syllabus does not specify how cultural aspects such as sweet foods are to be handled in the subject, leaving teachers to navigate a difficult landscape on their own and often reproducing their own cultural values (Höijer, Hjälmeskog, and Fjellström 2014). Some sweet foods, such as chocolate mud pie, are troublesome, and teachers are loath to allow them, while

others, such as apple or berry pies, cinnamon rolls, cupcakes, and Swedish holiday pastries, find their place due to their cultural importance (Bohm 2022).

Thus, even though HE might be expected to either limit the use of refined sugar or problematise and contextualise its social and cultural importance, instead it simply reproduces the view that sweet foods are not that healthy but we make them anyway, even in a subject that focuses on health. In the classroom, then, children and adolescents as well as their teachers need to deal with this paradox, which makes HE an interesting context to study. Here, it is possible to capture social interactions during the planning, cooking, and consumption of sweet foods, but also spontaneous conversations about sweet foods that are sparked by random associations during lessons focusing on other dishes. The aim of this study, therefore, was to explore how Discourses on sweet foods were formed, reproduced, and challenged in student and teacher interactions during HE lessons that focused on cooking and eating. In the study, sweet foods were defined as foods with a relatively high sugar content.

## Methodology

The study was underpinned by the belief that the way people talk and act creates different worldviews (or big 'D' Discourses [Gee 2014]), and that individuals can either reproduce or transform these Discourses. For example, a Discourse we might dub 'medical' uses scientific terminology to construct the worldview that refined sugar is unequivocally bad for physical health. This may be contested with, say, a 'social' Discourse that emphasises the relationship-building qualities of sweet foods that positively impact well-being. These types of Discourses are in constant interplay in the whole of society, but by studying them in the HE context, we hoped to find out how societal tensions around sweet foods manifested in a context where both physical and psychosocial health was meant to be a pervading perspective (NAE National Agency for Education 2011a). The present paper is part of a bigger study on Discourses where the earlier papers discussed vegetables, meat, and vegetarian food (Bohm et al. 2015a, 2016, 2015b). To capture and study these Discourses, we contacted teachers at five northern Swedish schools and asked to observe their lessons. In this way, we gained access to ten different student groups. The schools were located in four different villages and towns in northern Sweden. A total of 59 students participated, of which 38 were girls and 21 were boys. The students were between ten and 16 years old and attended grades 5, 7, 8, and 9. Five teachers, all female, also participated. Four of these were formally qualified and had permanent positions as HE teachers, and one was a candidate teacher accompanied by a supervising qualified teacher. Written, informed consent for audio recording, observations and videotaping was obtained from teachers, students and, for students under 15, from their legal guardians. Twenty-six HE lessons were observed and recorded with mp3 recorders, and – where permission was granted – videotaped. Twenty observations were carried out by the first author, and the remaining six by a department colleague. The study was approved by the regional ethics board (Dnr: 2010–255-31 M).

Conversations about sweet foods were transcribed, resulting in 39 double-spaced pages of text. The analysis focused mainly on spoken interaction, but we also watched the video clips to note gestures, body language, facial expressions, and movements through the room. For the spoken data, we employed Gee's (2014)

Discourse analysis method. This was divided into four levels, going from the very detailed scrutiny of linguistic and contextual features to broader conclusions about identities, worldviews, and what was seen as good or bad when it came to sweet foods. To exemplify, the first level involved basic analysis of grammatical constructions, subject choice, and intonation, and how this impacted meaning and created emphasis. If a student emphasised a word in an affected voice, we asked ourselves why they did this and what it meant. We also noted when there was a lack of personal pronouns in an utterance, such as when a teacher said 'Have to do this' instead of 'You have to do this', which we took to indicate a reluctance to overtly confer or assume responsibility. Contextual aspects that might change meaning were carefully considered, and we 'made things strange' by bracketing our intuitive understanding of everyday speech in order to catch sight of and question taken-for-granted truths and habits. An example of this was that we bracketed our knowledge about links between sugar and health issues and, from this imagined perspective of a clueless outsider, we asked why students presupposed and used such a link in their social interactions.

On the second level of analysis we scrutinised the style level of words, how word order impacted what was emphasised in sentences, organisation of blocks of speech, and how context impacted meaning. For example, knowing that a teacher had joked about the Swedish epithet 'sugar pig' at the start of a lesson, we could use that as background to the cunning look of a student who later added more sugar to a dessert she was eating. We interrogated utterances by imagining other ways of expressing roughly the same thing, thereby identifying what speakers strove to achieve by choosing one way of speaking over another.

The third level of analysis concerned what the speaker tried to 'build in the world' (Gee 2014) when it came to activities, identities, relationships, and politics. Here, we explored how speakers validated and discredited different ways of being and acting, for example how they constructed acceptable and unacceptable behaviour around sweet foods in HE, valuable and worthless artefacts or relationships, and 'good' or 'bad' students. We also analysed connections between phenomena, for example how sugar was tied to illness, as well as how speakers both reproduced and challenged context.

On the fourth and final level, we summarised our findings and made relevant theoretical connections. We looked for intertextual aspects in participant speech to see whether they used outside sources to back up the claims they made. We drew conclusions about what 'types of people' participants enacted, what worldviews they espoused, and how they related to and positioned others within these worldviews and in relation to their own identities. Finally, the first author rewatched the video clips and listened to the sound recordings again to check that our interpretations held good when related to the whole context.

In the results section below, we briefly summarise how participants constructed sweet foods in general, and then we go on to illustrate how these Discourses were used in detailed social interactions. All names are pseudonyms, and the student groups are named based on the grade the students were in, such as 5:1 to denote the first group in grade five, and 7 to denote the only grade 7 group. In the quotations, square brackets contain extra information about the situation or

activity, double brackets surround extraverbal signals like laughter or sighs, and italics represent emphasis. Single brackets indicate inaudible speech.

## Results

The 26 lessons studied all involved cooking in some form, but only five involved making sweet food. In group 9:3 and 8:3, some students made or used jam; group 5:1 and 7 made red groats (a Swedish snack made from fruit syrup or fresh fruit/berries, water, sugar, and potato starch); and group 5:2 made cookies and a Swiss roll. Even though other food was cooked during the rest of the studied lessons, talk about sweet foods could occur at any time, either as part of a theoretical assignment, during planning for the next lesson, or as random memories and associations. Overall, sweet foods were constructed as *desirable*, as something that students wanted to own, that gave power and status to the owner, and that students wanted a lot of. As such, they elicited strong emotions compared to other foods, and they could be used to include or exclude others in social bonding, but also gave rise to conflicts around distribution or 'perfect results'. They were used as a form of capital where ownership and fairness were important, and students could mark friendship by sharing and giving foods away. However, greed, secrecy, and deception could also occur as students tried to get more than their 'share', or they used their power of ownership to withhold foods from peers.

In contrast, sweet foods were also constructed as *unhealthy*, *disgusting*, and *unnecessary*, with lower status than more prototypically 'proper' food such as hot dinners. Homemade products had higher status than store-bought varieties. Contrasting aspects of the same food – the desirable, joyful cake that was also fattening – could be used to build or dismantle relationships and position oneself and others as good or bad eaters. Too much emotion, the wrong sort of product, or too-large amounts could be used as a basis for policing, ridiculing, questioning, or punishing fellow students.

### *Amounts and ownership: sweet foods as a form of capital*

Because sweet foods were desirable, students tended to want large amounts, and if the teacher offered too little, they were anxious to get their share. When 5:1 made pizza, teacher Birgitta offered the group a packet of ham and one small tin of mushrooms and pineapple, respectively. The relatively generous amounts of ham can be explained by the centrality of meat in Swedish cuisine (Bohm et al. 2015b; Holm et al. 2016), and few students wanted mushrooms, so the small amounts did not create conflict (Bohm et al. 2016). However, the four slices of pineapple turned out to be too little for a class of eight students. This indicated a hierarchy of foods where the teacher constructed pineapple as less important than ham, while the students valued it quite highly. An all-boy group were the first to take the tin, and Nils said, 'Let's start with the pineapple so that we get some', even though – or perhaps because – Alice in the neighbouring kitchen had pointed out that her group wanted pineapple too. Teacher Birgitta attempted to arbitrate between the groups to ensure fair distribution, but had perhaps miscalculated how popular the pineapple would be. Thus, a form of competition arose between students where some tried to make sure they got what they wanted even as others promoted fairness. There were also conflicts within kitchen groups about amounts or size. For example, when 5:2

made cookies, Nina repeatedly reminded the other students in her group that she wanted her share, saying things like, 'What about me?' and 'How much am I getting?' When the cookies were done and she cut them up, fellow student Beatrice admonished her for cutting them 'wrong'. She thought they tasted better if they were bigger, and nagged Nina to cut all of them the same size. Beatrice became more and more exasperated as Nina cut the cookies 'thinner and thinner', thus making it more difficult to ensure fairness when they divided them up.

Students could also sneak extra ingredients without the teacher noticing. For example, when group 7 made red groats, Inez added more of each ingredient, presumably to get more of the finished dessert:

Inez: One and a half decilitre of syrup. ((Whispers to Ivan)) Hey, it's supposed to be one and a half, but I've taken two and a half. Take more of everything!

These whispered words indicated the forbidden nature of her actions. During other lessons, when Inez's group cooked dishes such as sausage casserole, they did not add extra ingredients in secret, suggesting that sweet foods were more desirable. Even when students did not like a particular food, they could still value ownership. When 5:2 made Swiss roll, Nina asked Beatrice if she could have her share:

Nina: Do you like Swiss roll?

Beatrice: Ugh ...

Nina: If not, I can take the whole thing.

Beatrice: No way!

It is possible that Beatrice wanted to keep her Swiss roll not because she wished to eat it herself, but because sweet foods had relationship building properties and therefore conveyed a form of social power to the owner. For example, students could gift baked goods to each other as a mark of friendship – or indeed withhold them to mark a lack of it. They could even use sweet foods for power demonstrations: at one point, Adele offered to give all her cookies away and asked who wanted them, prompting Beatrice and Nina to shout 'Me!', only for Adele to laugh and say she was joking. Angelica commented on her behaviour by muttering, 'Like, "kidding", ha, ha ...' in a disappointed and sarcastic way.

The giving power of sweet foods was significant not only between students, but also between teacher and students. With the exception of the red groats in grade 7, students responded with enthusiasm to lessons that involved sweet cooking or baking. When sweet smells lingered from prior lessons or fellow students used sweet ingredients, they reacted with yearning and jealousy. Teachers could give in to students' wishes and be rewarded by enthusiasm, or reject them and have to explain why. A somewhat unusual example was when Alva in 8:1 wanted to use crushed candy cane in whipped cream to serve with a cake she planned to make during the next lesson. Teacher Birgitta told her to bring candy cane from home because it was too expensive, and this was the only time a teacher suggested such a thing. Earlier during that lesson, Alva's group had cooked chicken, which may be why she used it for comparison:

Alva: Isn't chicken more expensive?



Teacher Birgitta: But that counts as something else.

Alva: Chicken ought to be more expensive, right?

Teacher Birgitta: Nah ... ((Laughs)) Candy cane is unhealthy, too. That stuff isn't in the textbook.

Alva: What?

Teacher Birgitta: That kind of stuff isn't in the textbook.

Alva: So, you're not allowed it?

Teacher Birgitta: No.

Here, Birgitta argued against the candy cane with the help of medical aspects and a distinction between food types where candy cane was unnecessary and therefore not worth spending HE's budget on. To back up her claim, she referred to the HE textbook as an authority on what foods were officially sanctioned and not. In all, her arguments and her nervous laughter indicated uncertainty in the face of a student who challenged her choice not to offer candy cane.

### *Emotions running high: sweet foods as a precarious party-starter*

Compared to other foods in the dataset, such as pasta dishes or soups, sweet foods could elicit strong emotions, both positive and negative. The superiority of homemade sweet foods could be used to share pride in homemade creations, as when Lisa in 5:2 commented on the red groats she and her friend had made:

Lisa: Mm, this is the tastiest red groats I've ever eaten. But that's because it's you and me who've made it.

Lisa's exaggerated assessment, made half-jokingly, was clearly meant as social bonding by congratulating herself and her friend on their cooking prowess. As such, it built their relationship. However, showing too much emotion could elicit rebukes and embarrassment. In the following excerpt, several things happened at once. The teacher announced that 5:2 were going to bake treacle cookies, and the group erupted in excited chatter. Nina immediately got up from her chair to start baking, prompting Birgitta to remind the group that there was usually a run-through of the recipe before she let them start. Nina also remembered the video camera and expressed dismay over being filmed during her moment of excitement. When Angelica did not stop talking about how good the cookies were, Stina rebuked her by marking that Angelica had already conveyed as much, and Angelica sheepishly explained that she was just happy about making cookies:

Teacher Birgitta: So, we're making these.

Angelica: ((Reads from the recipe sheet)) Treacle coo ... ((Gasp)) Treacle! Treacle cookies!

Nina: Look, ooh ...

Stina: It's ... Angelica, it's really ...

Adele: Caramel cookies, or ... ?

Nina: Yes, it's sort of like caramel cookies. Come on, let's start! Come, come, come, come ...  
But ... ((tsk)) We're being filmed, and I just went, 'hahahaha'!

Teacher Birgitta: Oh!

Angelica: Treacle cookies are so good!

Stina: ((Admonishing)) I know, I know, I know.

Angelica: ((Sheepish)) A bit surprised and happy, that's all. ((General whooping among the students))

Teacher Birgitta: Yes, but do we have someone who ... Sit down. Sit down, we're supposed to read the recipe first, you know that. Are you that eager?

Here, Stina and teacher Birgitta gently rebuked students' 'uncontrolled' display of emotion. Stina did this by pointing out the redundancy of Angelica's joyful talk of treacle cookies, constructing her as repetitive by framing what she said as simple information rather than the bonding Angelica attempted to create around the anticipation of a tasty product. By rejecting her attempt at bonding, she constructed herself as more controlled and level-headed, and Angelica expressed some embarrassment at her outburst. While teacher Birgitta also harnessed the concept of control to guide student behaviour, she specifically used the expected structure of the lesson as a touchstone. By referring to a common and well-known lesson dramaturgy (Bohm 2021), she constructed the students as overly eager to start baking when they should know better and wait for the usual run-through of the recipe. This short exchange therefore illustrated sweet foods' connection to celebration and freedom from rules, but also the countermeasure, where order was re-established.

Both Nina and Angelica expressed embarrassment about their outbursts, but the atmosphere of half-hushed expectation remained for about half the lesson while the students started baking. However, another flip side of the desirability of sweet foods was that the possibility of not getting a perfect result could create conflict within groups who really looked forward to the finished product. For example, Stina and Angelica started debating the amount of time their cookies should bake in the oven. Stina wanted her cookies 'burnt', while Angelica wanted them slightly soft. Since they had used the same baking tray and Angelica decided to take the cookies out of the oven before Stina thought they were done, an argument erupted. Stina repeatedly suggested that they put the cookies back into the oven because they were too soft and she wanted them crispier, while Angelica tried to assure her that the cookies would become crispier as they cooled. Stina became more and more frustrated, bringing friends from neighbouring kitchen groups into the conversation to witness and confirm her claims about the perfect level of crispiness. She said the cookies were 'yuckier and yuckier', as if they deteriorated before her very eyes, and she referred to Angelica's preference by saying in a sarcastic voice that she wanted them 'so soooft'. She claimed to hate soft cookies and added under her breath that Angelica would 'eat them every day', as if constructing Angelica's consumption of the yucky, soft cookies as somehow reprehensible. Teacher Birgitta tried to mediate between them by pointing out that different people like different kinds of cookies, but this did not help much. Adele suggested that Angelica remove her cookies from the tray so that Stina could put hers in the oven again, and eventually they did so, but the quarrel still

continued. Angelica tartly pointed out that waiting for Stina's cookies would take a lot of time:

Angelica: Now you'll have to wait for a quarter of an hour.

Stina: Yes.

Angelica: I hope I have the time to wait for a quarter of an hour, Stina.

Stina: Yes, we do.

Teacher Birgitta: [To Angelica] Don't you want more colour on them?

Stina: No.

Angelica: No, I want them this light. And they get crispier later.

Despite the solution to the original problem, Angelica was still questioned about her preferences, this time by the teacher. Her mood had taken a definite turn for the worse since the start of the lesson, when she expressed such happiness about baking cookies. Towards the end of the lesson, when students shared cookies with each other, Angelica denied Nina a taste of hers because she had sided with Stina earlier:

Nina: I'm not getting any from Angelica.

Angelica: No, but you're so mean to me. I don't get to think what I want, and I don't like that.

Beatrice: Everyone should be allowed to think what they want, Nina.

Angelica: ((Jokingly)) Yes, there should be a democracy here.

Interestingly, the students could also find a failed dish funny. This seemed to form a part of the festive nature of sweet cooking. As mentioned above, Inez and Ivan had added extra ingredients into their red groats, but the finished product turned out lumpy and only tasted of starch, presumably because they had not paid attention to proportions. As they discussed why it failed, they tentatively conferred blame on each other but then agreed that someone in another kitchen group had told them to add extra potato starch. Inez repeatedly complained about how hungry she was, but she and Ivan still laughed about the bad result. Inez invited Ingrid from a neighbouring kitchen to have a taste, and explained that they had added too much starch. Ingrid laughed and said it 'looked like snot', Ivan said it 'only tasted of starch', and Inez said it 'tasted like shit'. After a while, Ingrid conceded that although the consistency 'did not work for her', it was not that bad on the whole and she liked it. Ivan exclaimed 'Good job!', and Inez laughingly repeated the phrase as an ironic assessment of their accomplishment. Eventually, she tried to get more of her fellow students to have a taste, revelling in its unpleasantness:

Inez: Irmeli, do you want to taste this? Taste, seriously, taste this. But seriously, taste it, please. Seriously. I'm not going to eat anymore. ((Laughs)) Please, can't you taste a little? Please. Please.

Irmeli: Is it disgusting?

Inez: No, but it's worth it to have a taste, I think. Taste it. It doesn't taste very good, but . . .

Irmeli: [Tastes the red groats] What the hell have you done? ((Laughs)) It tastes . . .

Inez: ((Laughs)) We added a bit too much starch, I think.

Ivan: ((Jokingly)) We added a little itching powder.

Here, the ruined red groats were a source of shared amusement and boisterous fun – indeed the very act of ruining the dish formed part of the rule-flouting atmosphere that surrounded sweet foods. Perhaps the students' irreverent handling of their dish can also be explained by the fact that red groats had lower status than cookies, indicated by the group's lack of enthusiasm for them.

### *Intake and status: sweet foods as a tool for policing*

Even though sweet foods were often desirable and had high status, they were also tied to negative health outcomes and weight gain, and they could have lower status than 'proper' food. For example, during a discussion with a student assistant, teacher Birgitta said that some classes in her school had not had HE in grade 5. She referred to one group as having had a little, but they had 'mostly made pastries and cupcakes, I think', indicating that this was worth less than other foods. Similarly, when teacher Olivia announced that group 7 were going to make red groats, Ingrid complained about it to her kitchen group:

Ingrid: We should get to cook food sometime. It's always like snacks and pancakes. (. . .) It would have been real good if we'd got to cook something *real* instead of just like ((affected voice)) *red groats*, like ((sarcastically)) mmm . . . But before sports practice, are you more likely to make like pasta and minced meat sauce or red groats? (. . .) If I'm honest, I think meat tastes better.

Sweet foods could also be constructed as downright disgusting. Eating a sweet food 'wrong' could elicit rebukes, as when Nina in 5:2 licked a drop of treacle from her hand and Beatrice exclaimed 'Ugh! You ate it!'. Here the treacle was disgusting because of the absence of other ingredients, or possibly because of its status as dirt – a substance in the wrong place (Lupton 1996). There was also a hierarchy of sweet foods, where some were better than others. For example, Dina in 9:3 constructed homemade jam as superior to store-bought varieties, and tied her assessment to both taste and physical health aspects:

Dina: I don't like store-bought jam. It's not as tasty, and there's just a lot of sugar in it.

Consistency could also make a sweet food disgusting. During the red groats lesson in 7, Irmeli was concerned about the layer of 'skin' that could form on the surface of the red groats, and repeatedly complained about how the dish looked, growing more and more dismayed. In the end she did not eat any of it, and even constructed the finished product as 'slime', thereby conferring a non-food trait onto the food and indirectly casting suspicion on anyone who ate or liked it:

Irmeli: You . . . you can have mine, I hate this. (. . .) No, red groats aren't my kind of . . . (. . .) No, I hate red groats. It's so bloody disgusting. It's like . . . *slime*.

Because they were considered unhealthy or less important than other foods, it was important to limit intake of sweet foods, but the acceptable amounts were never explicitly stated. Even though teacher Birgitta constructed sugary fruit drinks as unhealthy during a run-through, she had the students in 5:1 prepare just such a drink to go with their 'healthy' sandwich snack. Similarly, teacher Olivia lectured in 7 about the negative aspects of sugar, but then had the students make red groats using a prefabricated fruit syrup rather than whole berries. In 5:1, the students made red groats using berries, potato starch, and sugar, but when two boys found the result not sweet enough, this sparked a conversation about amounts:

Mattias: Can we add a *little* sugar?

Teacher Birgitta: Is it sour, or what?

Mattias: ((Softly)) Yeah . . .

Ove: ((Laughs quietly))

Teacher Birgitta: Yeah, there's a packet of sugar over there. Go ahead.

Mattias: Yeah.

Teacher Birgitta: Not *too* much, though.

Mattias: No.

Ove: ((Jokingly)) And then you drop half of it [in the bowl].

Here, the students were aware of the constraint put on sugar consumption, evidenced by the way Mattias emphasised the word 'little', and the way Ove joked about accidentally adding too much. The teacher acknowledged that the red groats might be too sour, but also marked that the students must not take too much – a vague limit that was perhaps open to negotiation. The other students in 5:1 also wanted to add sugar – Alice even reacted to the sourness of the dish by grimacing and waving her hands. When Lisa added sugar to her bowl, she looked at me and her friend with a naughty twinkle in her eye. Mattias commented on how much she added, constructing her as an addict:

Mattias: You're like total sugar adduc . . . a sugar addict. Lisa, you're a sugar addict.(. . .) Oh my God, what a lot of sugar you've taken.

Ove: You're going to get diabetes.

Mattias: *Yeah*.

Here, the boys policed Lisa on her sugar consumption, citing medical aspects and the comparison with drugs. Such attempts at policing may mirror societal power relations where men tend to control women's food intake (Lupton 1996), but it occurred between girls as well. When 5:2 made Swiss roll, Nina added granulated sugar to the jam, and Beatrice told her to stop, telling her, 'Don't add any more sugar – you want to get fat, or what?'

It was never clear exactly what the limit was before the line was crossed. When asked how many cookies a recipe would yield, teacher Birgitta said, 'It depends on how much [cookie dough] you eat on the sly'. The expression *on the sly* indicated that there was

something forbidden about eating cookie dough, but the teacher conferred responsibility for intake onto the student. She created a somewhat permissive atmosphere, but marked her expectation that the student stop eating at some undefined limit. There was also the unsaid expectation that, since baking the cookies in the oven was a school task during a HE lesson, the process itself was important (Bohm 2021). Thus, she positioned herself as a tolerant authority, a gentle yet slightly admonishing figure who showed understanding, instructed through reminders, and gave students freedom with responsibility. Later during the same lesson, Beatrice and Nina showed their awareness of the slight taboo against eating cookie dough by referring to the camera that filmed them:

Beatrice: This [the cookie dough] looks good.

Nina: I know. Taste it.

Beatrice: ((Whispers)) No, they're filming us. ((Giggles))

Nina: ((Scoffs)) Go and hide, then.

Because eating cookie dough was not entirely acceptable, Beatrice did not want to eat it while she was observed. Nina confirmed this by suggesting she do it in secret. Later, though, the two students did have a taste, and bonded over its goodness.

## Discussion

Although baking something sweet in HE can be an easy way to make students happy in a budget-friendly way (Granberg 2018), this study indicates that it can also spark conflict. When sweet foods were constructed as a valuable but scarce resource, arguments could arise around less-than-perfect results and unfair distribution. Students could compete for scraps in an individualist, arguably capitalist Discourse of ownership. Ownership gave power because sweet foods functioned as a form of social currency to give or withhold at will. The structured nature of cookie-sharing, where students decided how to handle their currency, echoed a Danish study on young people sharing food in sports centres (Sylov and Holm 2009). The researchers found that while friends could take French fries from each other's plates without asking permission, the rules of ownership were much more pronounced with sweets. It was up to the person who had bought them to choose which ones to distribute and to whom, or indeed to keep all of them. While the authors did not report any conflicts arising from this, in our study the students could withhold cookies and cakes as a way of rejecting and excluding each other.

While sweet foods were constructed as fun and festive, too much of a good thing was also socially risky. The vague but important limits imposed on intake meant participants had to walk a fine line between indulgence and restraint. Superiority could be marked indirectly, by constructing oneself as a refined and discriminating eater who preferred homemade sweet foods lower in sugar. Such positioning distanced the speaker from a taste for unhealthy, prefabricated foods discursively connected to the lower classes (Throsby 2018; Lupton 1996; Germov and Williams 2008). More to the point, sweet foods could be explicitly used to question, police, or ridicule each other. A student's food behaviour could be constructed as disgusting, fattening, unhealthy, or addictive. They were at constant risk of overstepping the vague line where they consumed too much or

the wrong thing. This disparagement of others' eating reflected the way people are judged on their eating habits in society as a whole (de Garine 2001; Stead et al. 2011; Vartanian, Peter Herman, and Polivy 2007). Self-control is a highly valued Western trait in general, but it has a special significance when it comes to sweet foods. These are generally constructed as seductive, especially for women, thereby conferring status to those who, by virtue of their slim bodies and/or display of temperance, show themselves able to resist (Lupton 1996, 1995; Throsby 2018). Indeed, teachers' vague instruction not to eat 'too much' transferred responsibility for intake onto the students in the Foucauldian vein of self-regulation (Coveney 1998). This is a direct reflection of how 'unhealthy' foods are handled elsewhere in society, where an abundance of products rich in fat, sugar and salt are simultaneously promoted and criticised, and it is largely up to the individual to navigate this ambiguity. Indeed, people can be quite intolerant of 'uncontrolled' bodies and overconsumption (Mead 2012), and Western culture 'continually encourages us to binge on our desires at the same time as it glamorises self-discipline and scorns fat as a symbol of laziness and lack of willpower' (Bordo 2009, 270).

In this ambiguous landscape, HE might function as an arena where amounts, emotions, and double standards are explicitly explored in relation to the physical and psychosocial dimensions of health in the HE syllabus (NAE National Agency for Education 2011b), but instead the dichotomous relationship between taste/culture and healthiness was reproduced. Even when sweet foods were constructed as unhealthy, some of the teachers still arranged for sweet cooking and baking without explicitly problematising and discussing this. By bringing up the negative aspects of sugar in their introductions but not following up with cooking assignments that reflected the theoretical content, they offered students knowledge about food and health on the cognitive level but did not apply it in practice (Pendergast and Dewhurst 2012). This reproduced a compartmentalised culture of healthiness in theory and pleasure in practice. Instead, it should be possible to discuss the cultural importance of sweet foods as an aspect of the psychosocial dimension of health that is included in the syllabus (NAE National Agency for Education 2011b), but earlier findings (Bohm 2022) confirm that teachers do not raise such topics when they arrange for sweet cooking in HE. Rather, they bring up health aspects when they use ingredients that are viewed as healthy, while they leave the less healthy ingredients uncommented on. Sections of the curriculum that deal with healthy eating are also kept apart from purely cultural content, such as the traditional baking of saffron buns in Advent (Höijer, Hjalmeskog, and Fjellström 2014). Similarly, HE textbooks tend to compartmentalise physical and psychosocial health, which means that sweet foods are constructed as physically unhealthy but culturally central, and the importance of culture for psychosocial health is left unexplored.

So why did HE teachers include sweet baking and cooking if not for a pedagogic opportunity to reason around the physical and psychosocial dimensions of health? Apart from the cheapness of the ingredients (Granberg 2018), it is possible that the relationship building properties of sweet foods can be used to garner popularity as a teacher. This may seem odd but is significant, since the current Swedish educational ideal highly values teachers' ability to build relationships, and sweet foods have such well-established relationship building properties (Morley et al. 2018). Arranging for sweet cooking and baking may also be seen as the 'care' discussed by Granberg (2018), in whose study teachers of students with mild intellectual disabilities tended to feel sorry for them and

compensated by arranging cosy lessons centred on baking and eating together. However, the compartmentalisation of health and culture in HE is hardly unique. A classic example of how the problem is handled on a societal level is women's magazines, where health tips and sweet recipes coexist and create a paradox that is difficult to navigate (Madden and Chamberlain 2004). As argued elsewhere (Bohm 2021), it is hardly surprising that HE teachers reproduce such an ingrained Discourse. Reproduction is often unconscious, and challenging dominant Discourses requires not only courage but resources such as time and energy, which may be in short supply (Bohm 2021).

Nevertheless, it would be preferable in HE to use a holistic Discourse of health that highlights how social and cultural aspects of sweet foods can impact well-being in positive as well as negative ways. One step in this direction might be for teachers to acknowledge and discuss the potential contradictions between theory and practice, and between physical and psychosocial health. They can highlight the psychosocial importance of sweet foods in human diets all over the world, and tone down the negative aspects of sugar by including sweet foods in pedagogical tools such as the food pyramid. For example, jam is an accepted part of a main meal in Sweden, perhaps because of its fruit content. Similar condiments that are culturally compatible with main meals include chutney, gari, honey, and dried fruit. By discussing these foods in relation to different traditions and to historical practices of conservation, teachers can clarify the important role of sugar in the human diet. Teachers might also discuss the variations in how health is seen in different cultures. For example, what westerners view as overweight can be seen as healthy elsewhere (Van Hook and Baker 2010). Another suggestion is to lessen the focus on results and ownership by making cooking a more communal activity. In this way, finished products would not belong to anyone in particular, but rather to the whole group. It might also be possible to do some experimental cooking, where students make different versions of a pastry and then compare them based on taste, price, and so on. In an assignment like this, using recipes from different cultures would take away students' preconceived notions about how the product should taste. Taken together, these suggestions might help both teachers and students understand the complexity and contextuality of sugar both from a cultural and a physical point of view. For maximum impact, these ideas should be introduced in HE teacher education so that a constant focus on both physical and psychosocial health is encouraged throughout HE teacher training.

## Limitations

The main limitation of this study was that only a minority of the lessons involved making a sweet food. On the other hand, the wealth of material pertaining to other types of cooking provided a crucial background, since the stark differences in Discourses surrounding vegetables, meat, vegetarian food, and sweet foods sharpened our analysis. A bigger corpus would also have made our detailed Discourse analysis more or less impossible due to time constraints. The lessons focusing on sweet foods were mainly concentrated to grade 5, which means that a majority of the data comes from younger students. This might reflect a less 'serious' application of the syllabus for lower grades, and a study that focuses on older students might



yield different data. However, the results of the study harmonise with societal Discourses on sweet foods, which strengthens our findings. Another possible limitation was the narrow geographical spread of the participating schools, which might lower the study's transferability. A similar study conducted in a bigger city or in the south of Sweden might yield somewhat different results, not least because budgets vary greatly between schools. The gender of the participating teachers may also have contributed to the 'care' aspect of sweet baking in HE. It is possible that a male teacher would be less inclined to build relationships through pastries and desserts, but this is mere speculation.

## Conclusion

Given how contradictory societal Discourses around sweet foods are, it may come as no surprise that the same issues show up in HE. Sweet foods were desirable but unhealthy, unnecessary and sometimes even disgusting. They were constructed as fun and tasty and were used to bond socially, but could also give rise to conflicts, tensions, policing, exclusion, and ridicule. The importance of amounts and ownership could also create an atmosphere of competition. Added to this, students had to navigate the risk of inappropriate consumption, not least because of vague limits to intake and a lack of problematisation of the concept of health. As a school subject with a focus on cultural traditions as well as both physical and psychosocial health, HE might offer a more holistic Discourse where the cultural and social importance of sweet foods are explored side by side with its various health properties. We therefore suggest that teachers explicitly acknowledge and discuss potential tensions between physical and psychosocial health, and also that they lessen the focus on ownership by making cooking a more communal activity. If this is done well, HE education might be an important ally in the societal effort to work against both increased intake and blanket disparagement of refined sugar among young people. In countries that have similar developments in eating behaviour as Sweden but that lack HE education, the insights from this paper might benefit other forms of health education.

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