

# Discomforting comfort foods: stirring the pot on Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> and social inequality in Canada

Melanie Rock · Lynn McIntyre · Krista Rondeau

Accepted: 4 December 2007 / Published online: 22 August 2008  
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2008

**Abstract** This paper contrasts the perceptions of Canadians who are food-secure with the perceptions of Canadians who are food-insecure through the different meanings that they ascribe to a popular food product known as Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup>. Data sources included individual interviews, focus group interviews, and newspaper articles. Our thematic analysis shows that food-secure Canadians tend to associate Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> with comfort, while food-insecure Canadians tend to associate Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> with discomfort. These differences in perspective partly stem from the fact that Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> consumption by food-secure Canadians is voluntary whereas Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> consumption by food-insecure Canadians frequently is obligatory. These differences are magnified by the fact that food-insecure individuals are frequently obliged to consume Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> that has been prepared without milk, a fact that is outside the experience of, and unappreciated by, people who are food-secure. The food-secure perspective influences responses to food insecurity, as Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> is commonly donated by food-secure people to food banks and other food relief projects. Ignorance among food-secure people of what it is like to be food-insecure, we conclude, partly accounts for the perpetuation of local food charity as the dominant response to food insecurity in Canada.

**Keywords** Canada · Food banks · Food charity · Food insecurity · Food security · Hunger

## Introduction

Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> was perhaps the first food product sold in a kit with a long shelf life, and with rapid home-based assembly in mind. While Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> is currently sold in a variety of flavors and formats, the ever-popular original version is sold in a cardboard box containing 225 g of dried macaroni made with enriched wheat flour and an envelope of powdered cheddar cheese. Kraft launched this product in Canada and the United States in 1937, when Depression-era hardships created a niche for an inexpensive meatless entrée; this niche market subsequently expanded with rationing during WWII (Jacobson and Salamie 2002). Today, Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> is the top-selling grocery product in Canada (Allossery 2000). Canadians annually purchase about 90 million boxes of Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup>, and consumption is spread remarkably evenly across the country, and in terms of age group, gender, occupational status, household income and level of education. Approximately 30% of all respondents in a random sample of Canadians reported consuming Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> in the previous 30 days (Print Measurement Bureau 2003). These figures do not take into account the consumption of imitator products marketed under private store labels. Similar to the way that the brand name Kleenex<sup>®</sup> is synonymous with facial tissues, both Anglophones and Francophones in Canada often extend the term “Kraft Dinner” to boxed macaroni and cheese. Boxes of store-brand as well as brand-name Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> are often sold for less than \$1CAD each. By way of comparison, the sale price for a brand-name tube of toothpaste or a pound of tomatoes, when in season, is about \$1.60CAD.

Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> is part of Canadian popular culture and reflects socioeconomic status or class differences. For instance, the Toronto-based pop rock group Barenaked Ladies scored an enduring hit with their song, “If I had a

---

M. Rock (✉) · L. McIntyre · K. Rondeau  
Department of Community Health Sciences, Faculty  
of Medicine, Health Sciences Centre, University of Calgary,  
3330 Hospital Drive NW, Calgary, AB, Canada T2N 4N1  
e-mail: mrock@ucalgary.ca

\$1,000,000” (Bateman 2007) which includes the refrain, “If I had a million dollars, we wouldn’t have to eat Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup>, but we would, we’d just eat more.” While Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> consumption is quite evenly spread across the socioeconomic spectrum, as hinted in the lyrics for “If I had a \$1,000,000,” obligatory consumption of Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> is associated with poverty. Furthermore, an association of Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> consumption with financial distress exists in parallel with an association of Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> consumption with feeling soothed and reassured. Reflecting the increased usage of the term “comfort food” in the English language, several dictionaries now include comfort food as an entry. Dictionary definitions include: (1) a food that comforts or affords solace; hence, any food (frequently with a high sugar or carbohydrate content) that is associated with childhood or with home cooking (Oxford English Dictionary 2007); and (2) a food prepared in a traditional style having a usually nostalgic or sentimental appeal (Merriam-Webster 2007). “In essence,” according to *The Encyclopedia of Food and Culture*, “comfort food provides individuals with a sense of security during troubling times by evoking emotions associated with safer and happier times” (Locher 2002, p. 443). In the United States (Locher et al 2005), Kraft Macaroni and Cheese<sup>®</sup> ranks as a common comfort food, as does Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> in Canada.

The common practice of individuals donating Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> and its imitators for charitable food distribution builds on associating Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> with both poverty and with comfort. Furthermore, many food banks and some food corporations actively promote donations of Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> and its imitators. A plastic bag issued by the Calgary Inter-Faith Food Bank Society, for example, lists “non-perishable food suggestions;” among them “macaroni and cheese.” Notices routinely appear in community newspapers across the country, urging people to donate food and suggesting Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> by name, thus: “Some of the items needed include cereal, peanut butter, canned fruit, tuna, canned vegetables, pork and beans, pasta, rice and Kraft Dinner” (Tayti 2000). “Each of our stores features pre-packaged food bundles containing the most needed food items according to the local food banks,” notes a public relations statement issued by a large supermarket chain (Safeway Canada 2007), and these bundles uniformly contain a box of private-label macaroni and cheese in the style of Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup>. In addition, adorning the bins set out by this supermarket chain to collect food bank donations is a poster of a school-aged boy shown smiling and eating a bowl of what looks to be Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup>.

#### Food insecurity in Canada

Food insecurity is an important social problem in Canada, with significant implications for public health (Tarasuk and

Vozoris 2003; Ricciuto and Tarasuk 2007). In higher-income societies such as Canada, food insecurity has been defined as “the inability to obtain sufficient, nutritious, personally acceptable food through normal food channels or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so” (Davis and Tarasuk 1994, p. 51). By extension, food-secure people have the ability to obtain, nutritious, personally acceptable food through normal food channels, and do not fear losing this ability. In 2004, 9.2% of all Canadian households were food-insecure, and the prevalence of severe food insecurity in female lone-parent households was five times greater than in couple-led households (Health Canada 2007). Furthermore, the data collected in this 2004 survey clearly showed a relationship between income and food insecurity. Households in which the main source of income was “social assistance” (59.7%) or “worker’s compensation / employment insurance” (29.0%) were more likely to report food insecurity than households with other main sources of income.

Despite the gravity of the problem, the dominant response to food insecurity in Canada remains extra-governmental charitable programs, commonly termed “food banks,” which focus on the collection and distribution of donated food. These locally-based programs emerged as an ad hoc response to the recession of the early 1980s, but have since evolved into a loosely-connected network and are now deeply entrenched in Canadian society. Food bank use has increased by over 99% since 1989 and at least 649 food banks operated across Canada, in all provinces and territories, as of March 2006 (Canadian Association of Food Banks 2006, p. 4). Persistent food insecurity undoubtedly contributes to the perpetuation of food banks, but it has also been shown that food banks fulfill important functions for corporate donors. For example, these donations spare corporations from paying landfill tipping fees and other costs entailed in disposing of products that, for many reasons (including manufacturing errors, damaged packaging, stocked past expiry date, wilted, or unpopular) cannot be sold at a profit (Tarasuk and Eakin 2005). Donations also assist corporations in projecting a positive image of corporate citizenship (DeLind 1994), especially to the food-secure majority. While corporate donations likely comprise most of the food distributed through Canadian food banks, donations from individuals account for about 25% of all charitable food distribution in major metropolitan areas (Tarasuk and Eakin 2005, p. 178), and likely more than that in smaller centers (Tarasuk and Eakin 2005, p. 180). The perspectives of food-secure people about food insecurity have yet to be thoroughly examined. This paper contrasts the perceptions of Canadians who are food-secure with the perceptions of Canadians who are food-insecure through the different meanings that they ascribe to Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup>.

## Materials and methods

This paper relies on transcripts of face-to-face interviews with people living in food-secure and food-insecure households, transcripts of focus groups involving people living in food-insecure households, and newspaper articles. The interviews with food-secure individuals that we draw on in this paper were conducted in French with 18 francophone residents of Montreal. A purposive sample (Bernard 2006, pp. 189–191) was identified via the first author's social network. Approximately half of the interviewees worked in social services as counselors or community developers, or both. Social service providers were of particular interest because their work routinely brings them into contact with people living in poverty; hence, they are well-positioned to compare food-secure with food-insecure contexts. The semi-structured interview guide included a question asking respondents to comment on why Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> is so often offered as a charitable food donation. The intent here was to collect information on social patterns of thinking and acting (Spradley 1979). Rigorous transcription (Poland 1995) was possible for eleven interviews. All of these interviewees were white, middle-class people who grew up in Quebec and who speak French as their first language. The youngest person interviewed was in her early 30s at the time of the interview, while the oldest were in their late 60s. Three were men and eight were women. This gender bias reflects the composition of the social service workforce. For the present paper, transcript segments in which these participants reflected on Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup>'s status as a common food donation were analyzed.

The second source of data for this paper was a study that sought to stabilize and increase milk consumption in low-income households (McIntyre et al. 2007a). Individual and group interviews were conducted for this policy-oriented study with 54 low-income lone mothers, all of whom were raising two or more children less than 14 years of age in the province of Nova Scotia. In follow-up focus group interviews involving a mix of the original respondents and new participants, 34 women were invited to comment on promising policy strategies that had emerged from the first round. This exclusively female sample was composed of predominantly white women aged approximately 20 to 40 years, reflecting the fact that most had young children. All transcripts (five individual interviews and nine group interviews) included discussion of food banks, and three out of nine focus group transcripts included the term “Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup>” or the common acronym “KD.” For the present paper, transcript segments in which participants discussed Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> or food banks were re-analyzed.

The third source of primary data for our paper was a study designed to document the occurrence and extent of food insecurity among low-income mothers and their

children in the Atlantic Canada region (McIntyre et al. 2002, 2003a, b). As part of this mixed-method study, in-depth interviews took place with 24 low-income lone mothers who had also provided quantitative dietary intake data. The women ranged in age from 21 to 41 years; 20 (83%) were of white Canadian background, three (13%) were of African Canadian background, and one woman (4%) was of aboriginal descent. All 24 of these interview transcripts included at least one of following terms: “food bank,” “food banks,” “Kraft Dinner,” and “KD.” These transcript segments were re-analyzed as part of the new dataset.

The fourth source of primary data came from newspaper articles archived either in the *InfoGlobe* database or in the *Canadian Newstand* database. *InfoGlobe* contains the full-text archive of *The Globe and Mail*, a Toronto-based newspaper that targets an elite readership and that is distributed across Canada. *Canadian Newstand* archives Canada's other nationally-distributed newspaper, *The National Post*, and over 200 other daily or weekly newspapers that serve cities and smaller communities. Of the more than 1,500 articles published between 1990 and 2003 that were retrieved from the databases *Canadian Newstand* and *InfoGlobe* because they mentioned Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup>, 155 articles mentioned food banks. These 155 articles were added to our dataset.

We used the qualitative research software NVivo (QSR International 2006) to compile the data and to assist with the analysis. Much of the analytic work took place over e-mail and in face-to-face meetings attended by all three authors. The third author, who had not been previously involved in data collection or in study design, coded the new dataset and shared the results with the other two authors. Thus, this paper could be described as secondary analysis of qualitative data (Bryman 2001, pp. 398, 414–415). Because all three authors are fluent in both English and French, we left the transcribed materials in their original languages, presenting the translations post hoc for manuscript purposes. The analysis began with free- or open-ended coding; sections of text containing themes of interest were identified, retrieved and tagged (Bryman 2001, p. 423). Emerging themes were illustrated with brief quotations and gradually refined into tree-structured codes (Bryman 2001, pp. 423–426) through repeated, iterative comparisons (inspired by Glaser and Strauss 1967), visual displays (Miles and Huberman 1994) and immersion/crystallization (Borkan 1999).

Our analysis focused on comparing the statements made by food-secure people with those made by people experiencing food insecurity. More specifically, we focused on contrasting the views expressed by food-secure Montrealers with those expressed by food-insecure lone mothers residing in Atlantic Canada. Because the newspapers in our sample targeted a middle-class readership, most of the

newspaper data reflected food-secure perspectives. On occasion, however, the newspaper articles described or quoted people experiencing food insecurity. Including the newspaper articles in our analysis helped us to validate, in a separate sample consisting of documents not originally produced for research purposes, the differences between food-secure and food-insecure perspectives that we observed in the transcript data. This approach to validation is often called triangulation (Webb et al. 1981 [1966]; Bryman 2001, p. 275).

## Results

We were able to use our various data sources to discern food-secure and food-insecure perspectives on Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup>. The results of our study are organized according to thematic content. We first outline food-secure perspectives on Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup>, and then turn to food-insecure perspectives.

### Food-secure perspectives on Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup>

#### *Palatable, especially for children*

One reason why food-secure people frequently offer Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> as a charitable food donation is because they regard the item as palatable. By palatable, we mean agreeable to the mind as well as satisfying to taste. Familiarity is an important element of this perceived palatability, for Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> is presumed to be familiar to the eventual recipients of charitable food donations. As one social service provider put it, “I have the impression it’s [given] because it is seen as a simple product that is well-known.” (“*C’est parce que j’ai l’impression que ça correspond à un produit simple, qui est connu.*”) (Interview #YUL-0323). A different social service provider concurred that people tended to have the impression that members of the working class enjoy Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup>, and thought this impression helped to account for why it was so often donated. (“*On a vraiment la perception que c’est aimé dans les couches populaires, en fait, je pense que c’est une perception que c’est aimé, le Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup>, malgré tout.*”) (Interview #YUL-0314). Along these lines, a lawyer suggested that Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> is so often given “probably because it’s known and appreciated” among the eventual recipients. (“*Probablement parce que c’est connu et apprécié par la population.*”) (Interview #YUL-0130).

Across Canada, Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> is strongly associated with childhood and youth. For instance, one newspaper article referred to “[t]hat definitive college student and kid staple, Kraft Dinner” (KD 1998, When only KD will do). This association of Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> with children and youth

was also found among Quebec Francophones. For example, one social service provider said, “I think that it is well-liked by children and younger people. It has the style of taste that they like. You know that a child is going to eat it up, but if you serve him something else, he won’t necessarily eat it.” (“*Je pense que c’est, ça plaît aux enfants, aux plus jeunes. Parce que c’est comme un style de goût qui plaise. Tu sais que l’enfant va le manger pis s’il lui sert autre chose, il le mangera pas nécessairement.*”) (Interview #YUL-0125).

Implicit in these responses to the question about Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup>’s status as a common food donation is the understanding that many food-insecure households include children. Another implicit understanding is that because it is enjoyed by many food-secure children and adults, it ought to be acceptable to members of a food-insecure household. A union official put it this way: “You might serve it to your own kids, to your own family, or even to yourself. In the end, you make it yourself.” (“*Tu peux en servir à tes enfants, à ta famille, ou même t’en servir pour toi-même, c’est que dans le fonds, tu le prépares toi-même.*”) (Interview #YUL-0126).

The fact that Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> is sold as a boxed do-it-yourself kit, as opposed to pre-cooked and in a can, also seems to confer the perception of palatability. For instance, the union official continued from the quotation above by saying, “It’s not reheated. That’s the big difference; you have to reheat what’s in a can you know.” (“*C’est pas un réchauffé, c’est ça qui est la grosse différence avec une canne ... que tu réchauffes, t’sais.*”) (Interview #YUL-0126). An archivist said, “It’s frankly less disgusting than a can of ... of stewed meatballs in a can, you know. At least it’s not canned food.” (“*[C’est] franchement moins dégueulasse qu’une canne de ... de ragoût de boulettes en canne, tsé, c’est quand même pas une canne.*”) (Interview #YUL-0201).

Often several boxes of Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> are donated at once, which may allow an individual donor to feel and look generous without spending very much money. One social service worker remarked on the common Christmas-time practice of bulk Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> donations in office environments:

You think in terms of charity instead of sharing, so you want to make a finite amount of your money go as far as possible. And so if you budget ten dollars, then you arrive with ten boxes of Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup>. That seems like you’re giving more and are more generous, or you have the impression that you are feeding more people, than if you arrive with, I don’t know, a chicken in a – a de-boned chicken or a box of chocolates.

*Tu penses charité au lieu de penser partage, ça fait que tu veux que ton argent, en avoir le plus possible à*

*donner pour un certain montant d'argent. Alors si t'as dix dollars pis que t'arrives avec dix boîtes de Kraft Dinner®, ça a l'air plus gros pis plus généreux, ou t'as l'impression de nourrir plus de monde, qu'arriver avec ... je sais pas ... un poulet dans un, un poulet désossé ou une boîte de chocolats.*

(Interview # YUL-0316)

Kraft Dinner® is a palatable donation—in the sense of being pleasing to a food-secure mind—partly because it is so cheap.

#### *A complete meal that is easy to prepare*

Besides palatability, many food-secure people regard Kraft Dinner® as suitable for donation because of preparation ease. “It’s easy to prepare and we assume, I suppose that people assume everyone knows how to prepare it,” said a lawyer in an interview. (“*C’est facile à préparer et on présume, je suppose qu’on présume que tout le monde sait comment le préparer.*”) (Interview #YUL-0130) “It’s easy for adults to make quickly,” noted one social service provider. “It’s not too complicated.” (“*C’est facile pour des adultes de faire ça rapidement, c’est pas trop compliqué.*”) (Interview #YUL-0125).

The standard or classic instructions read as follows:

- STIR pasta into six cups (1.5 L) boiling water.
- BOIL rapidly, stirring occasionally, 7–8 min or to desired tenderness. Drain.
- ADD 3 Tbsp. (45 mL) butter or margarine, 1/4 cup (50 ml) milk and the Cheese Sauce Mix. Stir until pasta is evenly coated.

What Kraft calls the Sensible Solution™ instructions differ somewhat. They call for 1 Tbsp of non-hydrogenated margarine and 1/2 cup of skim milk. Not only are the package instructions easy to follow, meal preparation is thought to be simplified because nothing additional need be prepared or added when serving Kraft Dinner®. A social service provider speculated:

Personally, I have the impression that when people give it [Kraft Dinner®] to food banks it’s because they say to themselves, ‘When you eat pasta, you feel less hungry.’ And so I have the impression that if you say, ‘Well, if there’s a bit of cheese, that makes for a bit of protein. And perhaps people are going to feel that they have eaten something better than just pasta alone.

*Moi j’ai l’impression qu’ils donnent ça dans les banques alimentaires parce qu’ils se disent: ‘Quand on mange des pâtes, on a l’impression d’avoir moins faim.’ Pis j’ai l’impression que si on dit: ‘Ben si y’a un*

*peu de fromage, ça fait un peu de protéines. Pis peut-être que les gens vont sentir qu’ils ont mangé quelque chose de mieux que juste peut-être des pâtes seules.*

(Interview #YUL-0301)

An archivist also supported this impression: “Simply put, there’s the idea of a complete meal, in the sense of protein, pasta. Instead of giving a package of white spaghetti, you give a kit that is a meal.” (“*Simplement, l’idée repas complet, dans le sens protéines, pâtes ... au lieu de donner un paquet de spaghettis blancs ... tu donnes le kit, qui est un repas.*”) (Interview #YUL0201). “It’s complete,” said another respondent, a lawyer. “You don’t have to add anything else, not even seasonings, not even salt.” (“*C’est complet. Vous n’êtes pas obligés d’avoir autre chose, même pas d’assaisonnements, même pas de sel, c’est tout.*”) (Interview #YUL0130).

And yet, the package instructions indeed call for additional supplies and ingredients: water and a pot in which to boil the pasta, fuel and a stove, butter or margarine, and fresh milk. Access to these items is taken for granted when food-secure people think about Kraft Dinner® as a do-it-yourself kit for a making a basic yet complete meal. Along these lines, a college professor said, “You have water! Butter, margarine, you have these too!” (“*On a de l’eau! ... Le beurre, la margarine, t’en as!*”) (Interview #YUL0129). Access to butter or margarine and to fresh milk is also assumed when food-secure people talk about Kraft Dinner® as something that always tastes the same.

This notion of taste consistency is also part of what makes it palatable, perhaps especially from a child’s point of view—but as a result, for parents too, and for prospective donors who imagine food-insecure households with children as the eventual recipients. As a union official put it, “Kraft Dinner® is always, always the same. So by serving it, you’re a good parent too. It works for you too. You’re a good parent, you have prepared it, and you have prepared something that is consistent.” (“*Le Kraft Dinner® c’est toujours, c’est toujours pareil ... Fait que là t’es un bon parent aussi. Ça fait ton affaire aussi. T’es un bon parent, tu l’as préparé, pis t’as préparé de quoi qui est constant.*”) (Interview #YUL-0125).

#### *Convenient and safe to store*

Along with palatability and presumed simplicity of preparation, the ease with which Kraft Dinner® can be stored helps account for its status as a well-regarded staple food bank donation. The interviews conducted with food-secure Montrealers suggested that Kraft Dinner® is routinely found in food-secure households partly because it is so easily stored for consumption at a much later date: it is non-perishable, compact, cheap and often sold in bulk. And the fact that it is

so often stored in food-secure households helps account for why it so often donated. As one social service provider put it:

Since it's not expensive, people will rarely buy just one box. They will buy three or four. So you might buy a case. When you have a case at your house, and people come by for food donations, you have a lot. So why not give even half?

*Comme c'est pas cher, c'est rare que les gens vont acheter une boîte. Ils vont en acheter trois à quatre, donc ... Faique t'achètes une caisse. Quand t'en as une caisse chez toi, pis que les gens passent pour le magasin partage t'en as beaucoup fait que ... Pourquoi pas en donner peut-être même la moitié, tsé?* (Interview #YUL-0323)

In summary, food-secure Canadians perceive Kraft Dinner® as a complete meal that is palatable for a variety of ages but especially for children, easy to prepare, easy to store, and easy to donate. The reasoning that leads food-secure Canadians to purchase Kraft Dinner® themselves appears to be embedded in singling out Kraft Dinner® for charitable donation from what they have stored in their cupboards. But the fact that Kraft Dinner® is cheap looms large in rendering Kraft Dinner® as especially appropriate for donation. Kraft Dinner® is considered “good enough” for consumption in many food-secure households, yet not “too good” for poor people to afford on their own, and so food-secure donors presume familiarity among the eventual recipients. Furthermore, Kraft Dinner® is cheap enough that food-secure people can easily afford to donate several boxes. For food-secure people, then, Kraft Dinner® can provide comfort through physical or vicarious consumption; vicarious consumption may be achieved by offering it to a child or by offering it as a charitable donation.

Food-insecure perspectives on Kraft Dinner® consumption

#### *Hunger-killer of last resort*

Kraft Dinner® is part of how many food-insecure households experience financial distress. Kraft Dinner® may be obtained from a food bank, but the product is also frequently purchased because of its low cost. When an interviewer asked a lone mother to list the foods on hand when times are tough or money is tight, the answer was, “Kraft Dinner, of course” (Interview #HM-203). Often, Kraft Dinner® is consumed near the end of the month, when most other food has run out, and there is either no money left for food, or only enough to purchase Kraft Dinner®. Reported one lone mother, “I get real low, low,

low like there's only one box of Kraft Dinner® in the house, I know that one box of Kraft Dinner® is going to be there like the day before my check comes.” (Interview #HM-201) Another lone mother said:

Usually the last week is the worst, then I find I get depressed, I get upset. I get where I just ... I don't even want to eat because I don't know, you know. I don't know if me eating that's like if I put on soup or something, I don't know if that, you know, maybe the next day it will be Kraft Dinner® or something and one of the kids won't want it and we don't have a whole lot that I can offer. But when you have no vegetables, no nothing, all you have is Kraft Dinner® and, um, like stuff like that, Kraft Dinner®, Mr. Noodles®, stuff like that, I mean ... I don't want my kids to go on that for a week. (Interview #HM-209)

Some food-insecure mothers indicated, however, that they purchased Kraft Dinner® because it is their children's favorite food. But these women distinguish genuine Kraft Dinner® from imitator products. For example, one mother said,

It has to be real. Well I don't blame them [her children]. Did you ever taste, taste that other stuff? The cat won't even eat it, I'll put it to you that way. Because there has been a couple of times that I made it and they wouldn't eat it so I see if the cat will eat it, the cat won't even eat it.” (Interview #HM-137)

Such remarks suggest that consistency over time, which is part of the food-secure perception of Kraft Dinner® as a palatable donation, cannot be fully achieved with cheaper imitations consumed under duress.

#### *An incomplete meal*

In direct contrast with the food-secure perception of Kraft Dinner® as a meal-in-a-box, the additional commodities required to prepare Kraft Dinner® according to the package instructions are rationed or lacking altogether in food-insecure households. Fuel consumption is closely monitored—access to electricity and natural gas can be removed if bills are not paid; butter or margarine may also be unavailable. Milk is required to make Kraft Dinner® according to the package instructions; and to be palatable, the milk should not be powdered but fresh. Yet in many food-insecure households, the most precious commodity of all is fresh milk. As soon as food-insecure households run out of money for the month, they cannot purchase fresh milk. A lone mother explained:

I used to buy myself milk all the time, and now I try to have one litre of milk in just for the Kraft Dinner®

spaghetti, forget me and my milk, you know what I'm saying. I shouldn't be doing that because I'm getting on in years and I should be making sure I have that calcium but you do. You have to pick and choose. (Interview #HM-205)

Similarly, a newspaper article reported on what, for food-secure readers, would be exotic circumstances: a "42-year-old single mother of three who makes the rounds of alleys at night scrounging for returnable bottles so she can buy milk for her kids... The children eat a lot of watered-down Kraft dinners 'but they don't complain as long as it fills them up,' she said" (KD-2003, Help for the needy). Consumers in the province of British Columbia may add a cash donation to their bill at supermarket check-outs, which "means that fresh local items such as fruit, milk and eggs can be donated to food banks" (KD-1997, Food banks), but such voucher programs remain uncommon enough to be considered newsworthy. In any case, the supply of fresh milk in food banks remains driven by charitable impulse, not by nutritional need. Thus, the Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> consumed in food-insecure households across Canada toward the end of each month is often watered-down, prepared with powdered milk or prepared without any milk whatsoever, adding symbolically and physically to discomfort.

### *Monotony*

One consequence of a restricted food budget is a monotonous diet, which in the Canadian context is often materially and symbolically tied to Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup>. The association of obligatory Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> consumption with low income was conveyed in many newspaper articles in our dataset, including the following example: "The Ryders don't use the local food bank. When asked how they feed a family of five on their limited income, Travis responded, 'We eat a lot of Kraft Dinner.'" (KD-1999, A home of their own). One lone mother, speaking of her daughter, said, "On other days, when we have no money, she has to eat Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> or French fries... She gets tired of the same meals. She don't even want to eat. She says, Mommy, I ain't eating Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> again today. We ate it all last week." (Interview #HM-138). And it is not only the children in food-insecure households who are eating Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup>. As another lone mother put it, "The things that I eat mostly, are stuff like Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup>, or a sandwich, that is if there is any bread left after [my son] and [my daughter] go through the bag, and Pepsi. That's my meals" (Interview #HM-074).

Some people regard Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> as the Rubicon of food insecurity: "I'm an inventive cook. I detest Kraft Dinner and hotdog suppers. I just refuse." (KD-1991, Going without, Recession). Others maintain that Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> should be transformed:

You know and I might not always have a good meal to throw together but I mean even with a Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> I can do wonders with a box of Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup>. I can. I put my peas and carrots in there and some soya sauce, oh yeah, and we do that right up. (Interview #HM-138)

Note that Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> can only be made-over in this way if some vegetables and a condiment can be procured. Note also that the sense that Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> should be avoided or reworked departs from the food-secure perception that, as sold, Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> is palatable and complete.

Discomfort, overall, permeates Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> in food-insecure households. Because Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> is often used to manage cash crunches, Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> purchases may involve discomfort because these purchases are made in situations of serious financial constraint or in anticipation of impending financial crisis. In food-insecure households, Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> is truly synonymous with lack of money to purchase other foods, contributes to dietary monotony, and compounds anxiety about maintaining a supply of fresh milk. We noted that the food-insecure respondents did not distinguish between Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> packages that were purchased or received from a charitable program. It seems as if it is the Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> itself, and not its source, that evokes discomforting feelings. While our dataset did not include discussion of consuming donated Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> compared with purchased Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup>, there was extensive discussion of the nutritional inadequacy of food bank fare and of the stigma associated with resorting to a food bank.

### **Discussion**

We have shown that Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> means different things to food-insecure compared with food-secure Canadians. Whereas food-secure Canadians tend to associate Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> with comfort, food-insecure Canadians tend to associate Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> with discomfort.

Although an estimated 73% of the population believes that hunger is a significant problem in Canada (Canadian Association of Food Banks 2006, p. 9), our analysis suggests considerable ignorance among food-secure Canadians about the particulars of the food insecurity experience. For example, food-secure Canadians do not generally associate food insecurity with fresh milk scarcity. Dairy products are carefully apportioned to different members of food-insecure households, with the youngest children given first priority (McIntyre et al. 2002, 2003a, b) meanwhile, fresh milk is both scarce and its availability of tremendous symbolic significance (McIntyre et al. 2007b). In light of

research showing fluctuations in nutrition over the course of a month in parallel with cash flows in food-insecure households (McIntyre et al. 2007; Tarasuk et al. 2007), and also of research suggesting that food shopping for loved ones may amount to an everyday sacrificial ritual (Miller 1998), a genuine Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> prepared with the requisite amount of fresh milk might be construed in some food-insecure households as an elusive goal.

The ill-informed food-secure perspective influences food donations, illustrated in part by the prevalence of Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> as a commonly donated food item. Rather than providing comfort to food-insecure Canadians, donated Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> contributes to discomfort among food-insecure recipients. Ignorance among food-secure people of what it is like to be poor amidst plenty may partly account for the perpetuation of local food charity as the dominant response in Canada to food insecurity (see also Rock 2006).

One limitation of this study is that our data on food-insecure perceptions came from interviews and focus groups with women who head up households on their own. Yet men also experience food insecurity in Canada, and their perceptions of Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> could differ from women's. Our data on food-secure perceptions, moreover, come from newspapers and from a small sample of interviews during which people were asked to comment on the common practice of donating Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> for charitable redistribution. Thus, an important limitation of this paper is that actual individual donation practices were not studied. Not all of the interviewees had donated to food banks, nor did the study aim to establish that all had donated Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> or a similar product in the past. Nevertheless, all interviewees readily agreed that Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> and its imitators are commonly donated, and the newspaper data supported this contention.

As noted by Tarasuk and Eakin (2005, pp. 184–185), most previous research on food insecurity in Canada has regarded the proliferation and subsequent entrenchment of food banks across Canada as a function of demand, that is, as a direct result of food insecurity. Their work has shown that the way in which food banks operate actually masks the severity and extent of food insecurity (Tarasuk and Eakin 2003), while also conveniently providing food manufacturers, wholesalers, and retailers with a low-cost way of disposing of unwanted products (Tarasuk and Eakin 2005). “The entwining of food bank work with the needs of the food industry must also serve to obscure the inadequacies and inappropriateness of food banks as a response to the problems of food insecurity and contribute to the entrenchment of this secondary food system,” they observe (Tarasuk and Eakin 2005, p. 184). In an earlier paper examining an annual food drive in Michigan, USA, DeLind (1994) also critiqued the entwining of charitable food

assistance with corporate agendas. We share the view that need alone cannot account for the popularity of food banks and other forms of charitable food assistance, and we suggest that, in addition to corporate interests, the perceptions held by food-secure people merit scrutiny. Food-secure individuals not only donate, they vote. And not only do they vote in elections of government officials, they vote with their feet when shopping. The use of food insecurity by food corporations in public relations, and the perpetual lack of publicly-funded initiatives to redress food insecurity, cannot be fully explained without considering public perceptions.

To recognize the discomfort that results from obligatory consumption of Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> requires food-secure people to view the world as it is actually seen and experienced by food-insecure people. By obligatory consumption of Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup>, we mean any product in the style of Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> purchased under financial duress, as well as any such product obtained from a food bank or other charitable program. First, obligatory consumption of Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> prepared without all requisite ingredients, fresh milk in particular, is not palatable. Second, obligatory consumption of Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> or any other food received through recourse to a charitable program is a stigmatizing experience because charitable redistribution does not constitute a normal food channel. If understood as “the inability to obtain sufficient, nutritious, personally acceptable food through normal food channels or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so” (Davis and Tarasuk 1994, p. 51), food banks cannot resolve food insecurity. Third, over time, repetitive consumption of Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> and its imitators contributes to a monotonous and nutritionally unbalanced diet. While Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> does provide some key nutrients, it provides little dietary fiber and may contribute to excess sodium, especially if consumed routinely in large portions.

Previous studies have underscored the importance of specific foods in making social class distinctions (Bourdieu 1984 [1979]; Mintz 1985; Roseberry 1997; Penfold 2002), yet questions regarding social inequality deserve further attention in contemporary research on food cultures (Mintz and Du Bois 2002; Phillips 2006). By contrasting how food-secure and food-insecure people perceive Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup>, the palpable salience of social class came to the fore in our analysis. Stark differences in how food-secure and food-insecure Canadians experience the world are thrown into relief when a box of Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> travels from a food-secure household to a food-insecure household via a food bank. Rather than a comforting satiety, one finds discomforting penury. The “biographies” or “social lives” (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986) of donated Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> boxes are structured by social knowledge, i.e., that Kraft Dinner<sup>®</sup> is palatable, easy to store, and easy to

prepare in food-secure households so it must retain these properties in food-insecure households—social knowledge which is also a form of ignorance. In the contemporary Canadian context, confidence of mainstream society regarding Kraft Dinner®'s stability is part of “ignorance-qua-knowledge” (cf. Gershon and Raj 2000) that helps to constitute “food-secure” and “food-insecure” as inter-related social positions. The social dynamics that produce health and wealth, in other words, also produce sickness and poverty; so much so that central or dominant perspectives exert structuring effects on lives led at the peripheries (Nguyen and Peschard 2004; Moore 2006). Living in the shadow of abundance (Storper 2000), meanwhile, is part of the discomfort synonymous with food insecurity. Ultimately, Kraft Dinner® “tastes” entirely different, depending upon whether a given box ends up being consumed in a food-secure or in a food-insecure household.

**Acknowledgements** We thank the people who participated in our studies for sharing their experiences and insights, and we thank Harvey James, Nancy Grudens-Schuck and two anonymous reviewers for commenting on a previous version of this manuscript. We also thank our funders: the Alberta Heritage Foundation for Medical Research (AHFMR PHI-200600378); the Canadian Institutes for Health Research (CIHR 200609MSH-167158, CIHR/CHSRF PDA-0080-05); the Canadian Health Services Research Foundation (CIHR/CHSRF PDA-0080-05); the CIHR/CHSRF Chair in Community Approaches and Health Inequalities held by Dr. Louise Potvin at the Université de Montréal (CIHR/CHSRF/FRSQ CP1-0526-05); the Faculty of Medicine, University of Calgary; the Institute of Health Economics (IHE-197); the National Health Research and Development Program (NHRDP No. 6603-1550-002); the Public Health Services, Capital District Health Authority, Halifax, Nova Scotia; and the Dairy Farmers of Canada Open Operating Grants competition.

## References

- Allossery, P. 2000. Kraft hits its mark in a cheesy moment. And why Kraft's new ad campaign brings it back to form. *National Post* C.04.
- Appadurai, A. 1986. Introduction: commodities and the politics of value. In *The social life of things: commodities in cultural perspective*, ed. A. Appadurai, 3–63. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Bateman, J. 2007. Barenaked Ladies. *Encyclopedia of music in Canada 2007*. Available from <http://thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=U1SEC843622>. Cited 22 February 2007.
- Bernard, H.R. 2006. *Research methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press.
- Borkan, J. 1999. Immersion/crystallization. In *Doing qualitative research*, ed. B. Crabtree and W.L. Miller, 179–194. London: Sage.
- Bourdieu, P. 1984 [1979]. *Distinction: a social critique of the judgment of taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bryman, A. 2001. *Social research methods*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Canadian Association of Food Banks. 2007. HungerCount 2006. Canadian Association of Food Banks 2006. Available from [http://www.cafb-acba.ca/documents/2006\\_HungerCount\\_EN\\_de\\_signed.pdf](http://www.cafb-acba.ca/documents/2006_HungerCount_EN_de_signed.pdf). Cited 21 February 2007.
- Davis, B., and V. Tarasuk. 1994. Hunger in Canada. *Agriculture and Human Values* 11 (4): 50–57.
- DeLind, L.B. 1994. Celebrating hunger in Michigan: a critique of an emergency food program and an alternative for the future. *Agriculture and Human Values* 11 (4): 58–68.
- Gershon, I., and D.S. Raj. 2000. The symbolic capital of ignorance. *Social Analysis* 44 (2): 3–14.
- Glaser, B.G., and A.L. Strauss. 1967. *The discovery of grounded theory: strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Health Canada. 2007. Income-related household food security in Canada. Canadian Community Health Survey, Cycle 2.2, Nutrition (2004) 2007. Available from [http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/surveill/nutrition/commun/income\\_food\\_sec-sec\\_alim\\_e.html](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/surveill/nutrition/commun/income_food_sec-sec_alim_e.html). Cited 24 August 2007.
- Jacobson, R.R., and D.E. Salamie. 2002. Kraft foods. In *International directory of company histories*, vol. 45, ed. J.P. Pederson, 235–244. Detroit, Michigan: St. James Press.
- Kopytoff, I. 1986. The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process. In *The social life of things: commodities in cultural perspective*, ed. A. Appadurai, 64–91. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Locher, J.L. 2002. Comfort food. In *Encyclopedia of food and culture*, ed. S.H. Katz, 442–443. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Locher, J.L., W.C. Yoels, D. Maurer, and J. Van Ells. 2005. Comfort foods: an exploratory journey into the social and emotional significance of food. *Food and Foodways* 13: 273–297.
- McIntyre, L., N.T. Glanville, S. Officer, B. Anderson, K.D. Raine, and J.B. Dayle. 2002. Food insecurity of low-income lone mothers and their children in Atlantic Canada. *Canadian Journal of Public Health* 93 (6): 411–415.
- McIntyre, L., N.T. Glanville, K.D. Raine, J.B. Dayle, B. Anderson, and N. Battaglia. 2003a. Do low-income lone mothers compromise their nutrition to feed their children? *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 168 (6): 686–691.
- McIntyre, L., S. Officer, and L.M. Robinson. 2003b. Feeling poor: the felt experience of low-income lone mothers. *Affilia: Journal of Women and Social Work* 18 (3): 316–331.
- McIntyre, L., V. Tarasuk, and T. Jinguang Li. 2007a. Improving the nutritional status of food-insecure women: first, let them eat what they like. *Public Health Nutrition* 10 (11): 1288–1298.
- McIntyre, L., P. Williams, and N.T. Glanville. 2007b. Milk as metaphor: low income lone mothers' characterization of their challenges in acquiring milk for their families. *Ecology of Food and Nutrition* 46: 263–279.
- Merriam-Webster. 2007. Comfort food 2007. Available from <http://www.m-w.com>. Cited 24 August 2007.
- Miles, M.B., and A.M. Huberman. 1994. *Qualitative data analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Miller, D. 1998. *A theory of shopping*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Mintz, S. 1985. *Sweetness and power: the place of sugar in modern history*. New York: Viking Press.
- Mintz, S., and C. Du Bois. 2002. The anthropology of food and eating. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31: 99–119.
- Moore, S. 2006. Peripherality, income inequality, and life expectancy: revisiting the income inequality hypothesis. *International Journal of Epidemiology* 35 (3): 623–632.
- Nguyen, V.-K., and K. Peschard. 2004. Anthropology, inequality, and disease: a review. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 32: 447–474.
- Oxford English Dictionary. 2007. Comfort food 2007. Available from <http://dictionary.oed.com>. Cited 24 August 2007.
- Penfold, S. 2002. 'Eddie Shack was no Tim Horton': Donuts and the Folklore of mass culture in Canada. In *Food nations: selling*

- taste in consumer societies*, ed. W. Belasco and P. Scranton, 48–66. London, New York: Routledge.
- Phillips, L. 2006. Food and globalization. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 35: 37–57.
- Poland, B.D. 1995. Transcription quality as an aspect of rigor in qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry* 1 (3): 290–310.
- Print Measurement Bureau. 2003. PMB 2003 category reports: groceries 2003. Available from [www.pmb.ca](http://www.pmb.ca). Cited 24 February 2004.
- QSR International. 2006. NVivo 7, Version 7.0.247.0 [computer software]. Doncaster, Victoria, Australia: QSR International Pty. Ltd.
- Ricciuto, L.E., and V.S. Tarasuk. 2007. An examination of income-related disparities in the nutritional quality of food selections among Canadian households from 1986–2001. *Social Science and Medicine* 64 (1): 186–198.
- Rock, M. 2006. ‘We don’t want to manage poverty’: community groups politicize food insecurity and charitable food donations. *Promotion and Education: International Journal for Health Promotion and Education* 13 (1): 36–41.
- Roseberry, W. 1997. The rise of yuppie coffees and the reimagining of class in the United States. *American Anthropologist* 98 (4): 762–775.
- Safeway Canada. 2007. Safeway community caring. National sponsorships and programs. Food bank 2007. Available from [http://shop.safeway.com/corporate/safeway/community\\_can/food\\_bank.asp](http://shop.safeway.com/corporate/safeway/community_can/food_bank.asp). Cited 21 February 2007.
- Spradley, J. 1979. *The ethnographic interview*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Storper, M. 2000. Lived effects of the contemporary economy: globalization, inequality, and consumer society. *Public Culture* 12 (2): 375–410.
- Tarasuk, V., and J.M. Eakin. 2003. Charitable food assistance as symbolic gesture: an ethnographic study of food banks in Ontario. *Social Science and Medicine* 56 (7): 1505–1515.
- Tarasuk, V., and N. Vozoris. 2003. Household food insufficiency is associated with poorer health. *Journal of Nutrition* 133 (1): 120–126.
- Tarasuk, V., and J.M. Eakin. 2005. Food assistance through “surplus” food: insights from an ethnographic study of food bank work. *Agriculture and Human Values* 22 (2): 177–186.
- Tarasuk, V., L. McIntyre, and J. Li. 2007. Low-income women’s dietary intakes are sensitive to the depletion of household resources in one month. *Journal of Nutrition* 137 (8): 1980–1987.
- Tayti, M. 2000. Invitations out for Welland food drive. *Tribune* B.3.
- Webb, E., D.T. Campbell, R.D. Schwartz, and L. Sechrest. 1981 [1966]. *Unobtrusive research: Nonreactive research in the social sciences*. Chicago: Rand McNally.

## Author Biographies

**Melanie Rock** holds the position of Assistant Professor in the Department of Community Health Sciences at the University of Calgary. She is also affiliated with the Faculty of Social Work and the Department of Anthropology at the University of Calgary, and with the *Groupe de recherche interdisciplinaire en santé* (GRIS) at the Université de Montréal. Previous publications have mainly dealt with recent changes in scientific and popular perceptions of diabetes. Her current research focuses on animal–human connections as societal and cultural dimensions of human health.

**Lynn McIntyre** holds the position of Professor in the Department of Community Health Sciences at the University of Calgary. Prior to taking up this position, she served three terms as Dean of the Faculty of Health Professions at Dalhousie University. She holds both a medical degree and a master’s degree in Community Health and Epidemiology. She is a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada in Community Medicine. Much of her research deals with how women and children experience food insecurity.

**Krista Rondeau** holds the position of Research Associate in the Department of Community Health Sciences at the University of Calgary. She is a registered dietitian, and she is currently conducting research on Canadian farmwomen’s conceptualization of food safety for a master’s degree in Health Promotion Studies at the University of Alberta.