

CHAPTER 4

The Sugar Devil

Demonizing the Taste of Sweetness in Denmark

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Introduction: A Magic Tree

During my fieldwork on children's food perceptions¹ I was told a story by a parent in a kindergarten that the manager of the institution was going to retire, and another would take over. The former pedagogue had for many years had a tradition that the children loved. In the middle of the playground there was a tree. This tree could once a year turn magic and be filled with pancakes, soda or sweets, astonishing the children and setting the ground for a party in the kindergarten. But, when the new leader began her work in the kindergarten, she decided to cut down the tree as part of the new anti-sugar strategy she wanted to introduce. This was a symbolic act to signal that pancakes, soda and sweets were from that day not allowed in the institution.

Our knowledge about sugar, and other foodstuffs, has social consequences. This is not a big mystery: all over the world, knowledge about food and its nutritional value is distributed to citizens and used when planning meals, cooking and eating together (Mintz 1996). The interesting point regarding the case of sugar is the degree of attention it has caught in Danish society, especially

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in relation to children: nearly every school, kindergarten and nursery has a policy of sugar consumption.

Whether sugar is healthy or not is not the question here – rather, I am curious about how it has become possible within a relative short number of years to change the perceptions of sugar and agree on it as a dangerous foodstuff, to the extent that there are written rules for its use for nearly all children in Denmark. It seems as if these rules are not neutral nutritional guidelines solely for the benefit of the health of the individual; also, they have a moral meaning: it is not a free or private choice to eat sugar or not; the collective is perceived to be threatened if children's sugar intake is not controlled by parents and teachers.

But what creates this apparent agreement about sugar being a bad thing to be eaten? In this chapter I argue that Stanley Cohen's (2011 [1972]) concept of *moral panic* can be used as a lens to understand this development. As the British sociologist Alan Beardsworth notes, using moral panic as an analytical perspective on the meaning of food can 'map out the broader cultural and economic context within which food consumption as risk-taking behaviour takes place' (Beardsworth 1990, 11). Thus, this approach proposes that the public process of 'bedevilling' is not only about demonizing groups or categories of people; it can also be used to understand the emergence of public anxiety in general. Inspired by Beardsworth, I propose that the relation between science and digital media contributes to this production of anxiety.

The Devil: Sugar is Evil

The Sugar *Devil*, that's me! I am sighing after you: Give me sugar the whole day, give me a shop of candy that will never close. If you serve cabbage and sausage for me, I can be really evil and angry, because I want sweets that are sticky, because I am my own health minister, I want to live in your stomach and I will torment you until it rains with sugar on me. Why should I have ryebread and apples, when my teeth have fallen off, and it is sugar I want?² (emphasis by the author)

To identify sugar with the Devil is not my own idea. This Danish children's song does it explicitly: it uses the metaphor of the Devil to express how craving for sugar can be out of your own control, beyond reason and can be imagined as if someone took over your body. The idea of interpreting the preference for sugar as a devil is part of public culture in Denmark: a simple search on Google confirms that people exchange experiences with an uncontrollable desire for sugar as having a stranger, and uninvited creature, living in your body: the Sugar Devil. People often share and communicate their relation to sugar and the taste of sweetness through the metaphor of the Devil, many of them naming sugar as a devil in disguise, an inner voice that causes dilemmas between the attraction towards sugar and the moral voice telling you it is bad.

Cohen (2011 [1972]) uses the concept of ‘folk devils’ about stereotypes ascribed to people assumed to do harm in society, having evil intentions, acting against norms and with deviant behaviour, challenging the moral order. Typical objects for this thought model are young men, migrants, unemployed people and other marginalized categories (*ibid.*). Cohen explores how people enter this category of being a devil as a result of social and cultural processes. He shows how local and context-related events provoke a generalized reaction, based on myths and stigmas (*ibid.*, 122), and explains how the event and the people involved get more and more detached from the original story and the concrete persons involved. The Sugar Devil is not a person within the meaning Cohen presents but an imagined figure that can be found both within the society and within individuals.

It seems as if people create a ‘folk theory’ (Kleinman, Eisenberg, and Good 1978) here assigning sugar agency, or giving it human characteristics. This knowledge about health and medical practices is exchanged in ‘the popular health care sector’ (*ibid.*, 140), which is characterized by being a grey zone of lay and expert knowledge from where people define symptoms and illnesses, and diagnose and treat themselves and others through advice based on common-sense interpretations. Some examples from the ways the bedevilling of sugar is communicated show not one, but many different sides of its ‘evilness’.

‘Sugar makes children unrest’³ is a typical example of the statement that sugar has the ability to make children restless. This is an argument often found in texts and language within the Danish school pedagogy. Another version is ‘children get high by eating sugar’, which is communicated as a truth in many texts, blogs, Facebook comments and so forth, and theories about ADHD and other behavioural problems are often linked to this idea. Allowing children to eat sugar will result in disturbance of the order in a school class by increasing excitement. It is, though, according to doctors, a myth that sugar has this impact on children (Hoover and Milich 1994; Vreemann 2008; Wolraich, Wilson, and White 1995).

Another argument against sugar is one that states that it threatens the feeling of equality in a group of children. Pedagogues have told me that the reason why they ask parents not to give their children sweet food in their lunchboxes is that the other children will envy them. And this will cause problems for the other children to eat their own food. In one kindergarten it is formulated like this in a leaflet for parents: ‘Our wish is that the children don’t bring sweet food with them in their lunch packet, as it creates jealousy in the group.’ I know of kindergartens that even control the lunchboxes before lunch time, in order to identify and remove sweet stuff from them.

One of the most typical arguments against sugar is its assumed threat to health. Sugar is often called ‘empty calories’ that ‘steal’ the appetite from the child. In this way the child will risk not getting enough vitamins and other micro-nutrients. Avoiding sugar leaves space for other, healthier food items, it is reasoned.

In this specific case on sugar as a risky foodstuff, the message is thus related to different types of arguments, from sugar causing deviant behaviour to sugar threatening the social coherence, as well as its general health and nutritional status. Behind all these arguments lies the idea that children will prefer sugar for other food if their sugar intake is not restricted. Sugar has characteristics like a devil – it has a spirit, it takes over your brain and makes you powerless, and you must give in to your desire for the sweet taste – or learn to control it. In many ways it is seen as a toxic (Rozin 1997): it is not about degrees of intake, but about not touching it at all.

The ways in which sugar is described as having devilish qualities mean that the intake has consequences, not only for yourself but for the collective, which make the bedevilling a broader moral issue, a question of right and wrong.

Sugar and Morality

Before digging into sugar as a medium for *moral* panic, it is worth remembering that eating is in itself a moral practice. The existing corpus of work on the anthropology and sociology of food has clearly documented this (see e.g. Douglas 1984; Lupton 1996; Mintz 1997; Murcott 1992). Analysing how food, eating and morality are interwoven has – within anthropology as well as sociology – produced an enormous corpus of knowledge about the cultural and symbolic constructions of food, thereby providing insights into how issues such as the body, health, gender, sociality, identity, discourse, consumption and social policy are all related to morality. Mary Douglas's foundational study of purity and danger, which examined how people classify food items into pure/impure, edible/inedible and good/bad (Douglas 1966), has subsequently been supported by a range of both anthropological and sociological studies exploring the relation between food and morality (Bildtgaard 2010; Coveney 2006; Forrest and Najjaj 2007; Friedland 2008; Kimura 2011; Lupton 1996). This research shows that people adjust and negotiate their moral standpoints in relation to what they eat. For example, a British/Australian study from 2011 on the consumption of meat revealed that people's moral concern for cows decreased after consuming beef, indicating that people restrict their moral concern for animals when eating them. This finding suggests that people are motivated to avoid the conclusion that they are involved in the harm of a morally worthy animal. Hence, seeing an animal as food is sufficient to diminish its perceived capacity to suffer and this dampens our moral concern (Bratanova, Loughnan, and Bastian 2011). It seems, though, that eating meat today, in the year 2021 in the context of the climate debate, is an object for moral considerations in new and intense ways. Another recent quantitative study explored perceptions of ethical and unethical food among European students, revealing both how individuals make clear distinctions between good/bad, edible/inedible and moral/evil food, and that particular moral qualities are associated with particular

food items (Mäkiniemi, Pirttilä-Backman, and Pieri 2011; see also Ruby and Heine 2011).

Warren Belasco takes a historical sociological perspective when asking whether modern dining has become amoral (Belasco 2008, 186) as the consumer has lost the opportunity to see through the process of production and its impact on the environment. Carole Counihan shows through her study of students' records of their eating how cultural food rules expresses an ideology of life that focuses on how and what is eaten. She argues that eating is not a simple act of fuelling the body but a moral behaviour through which people construct themselves as good or bad human beings (Counihan 1992, 62). Another perspective has been that of eating in relation to time and place, shedding light on the different moralities at stake when people dine at home or at restaurants, or, similarly, when they eat at home or while on holiday (Caplan 1997).

When it comes to sugar, the moral connotations are not about animal welfare, production methods, climate worries or industrial power; although the history of sugar production contains many of these ethical questions, especially about slavery (Mintz 1985). These topics are not brought into current arguments against its use. The moral questions of sugar consumption point to a row of other reasons. Paul Rozin asks, in a paper from 1987, why sugar gives rise to such strong feelings, and mentions several possible reasons. First, it can be traced back to Puritan values that judge everything pleasurable as bad. In this regard, to crave sugar is a sin, not only at a personal level but in a religious meaning. The implicit reference is the story of the Fall, which begins with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and the snake tempting Eve to take a bite of an apple from the tree of knowledge. This story, according to Kenneth Burke (1969 [1950]), is a fundamental moral drama often retold in Western cultures (Mechling and Mechling 1983, 22). Regarding the desire and passion for sweetness, the story of Eve's temptation is, for example, often retold in advertisements that tend to represent women as having more of a 'sweet tooth' than men (Robertson 2009).

Another reason can be that the consumption of sugar is related to obesity, which for a long time has been seen as a moral failure, at least in Western societies (Rozin 1987; see also Lupton 1996). But it is not only the body *weight* that is threatened by our attraction to sugar. Sugar is also seen as a danger to many other bodily functions: sugar can destroy your teeth, it can give you a stomach ache, and it can disturb your blood sugar balance, just to mention some of the assumed negative impacts. Sugar consumption is related to life-style and lifestyle diseases such as diabetes, and as such understood as a risky and dangerous foodstuff.

Eating dangerous food makes you dangerous yourself, Rozin argues, referring to the saying 'you are what you eat' (Rozin 1987: 102). He traces this belief back to the work of James George Frazer (1959) and Marcel Mauss (1972), who both pointed to 'the law of contagion' – the idea in some societies that being in touch with a foodstuff can transfer its inherent values to the eater. For example,

when eating meat from a lion or another animal, you can get the strength from this creature. In the same way, the negative consequences of eating sugar can be transferred to the person eating it. Because of the danger of sugar, the logic seems to be that eating it makes you a dangerous person (Rozin 1987).

Furthermore, Rozin observes, the fact that you cannot see sugar in many food products makes it necessary to learn about its presence in other ways, and therefore to develop an ability to practise self-management. Parents teach their children this by reserving certain time spots for the use of sugar: you cannot eat it in the morning, but as a dessert in the evening. You are allowed to eat it during celebrations, or at special times of the year, such as Christmas. In Denmark this 'sugar timing' also exists in the 'Friday candy' tradition – a custom that has developed over the last 20–30 years, allowing children to eat sweets on Friday evenings, and often only this day in the week (leading to a very high sugar consumption once a week). Thus, the hidden presence of sugar does not prevent it to work at a social level: its invisible existence is both a medium for socialization, a way of learning about time and everyday rhythms, and a form of social glue.

In addition, and especially in relation to children, sugar has – because of its pleasurable characteristics – been used all over the world as a reward in the upbringing of children, when the child has done something good or difficult, or to comfort a child with a wound, or one having been brave at the doctor or at hospital. But, as Allison James has shown, for adults, sugar is also a symbol of love: a typical gift for Valentine's Day is chocolate, indicating an intimate relation between the giving person and the receiver (James 1982). This double meaning of sugar as both a reward and a threat makes it even more important to exercise control.

The anthropologist Sidney Mintz published the famous book *Sweetness and Power* in 1985, where he documents the development of sugar consumption in a historical context. He shows how sugar went from being a seldom spice, only accessible to the few, to now being a product to be found in nearly everything: cereals, desserts, bread, ketchup, ice cream, crackers, marmalade. The morality of sugar, he argues in a later article (Mintz 1997), is linked to a historical ideal of individualism. The question for the consumer today is not where to get it, or how to afford it, but how to avoid it (*ibid.*, 181). Therefore, the moral issue is self-discipline or self-management. 'The use of consumption as a means to define oneself becomes commoner' (*ibid.*). The modern individual has to exercise choice to succeed in life: to reject not only sugar, but also 'tobacco, drugs, coffee, television, cholesterol, unfiltered water, synthetic fiber, unradiated fruit, red meat'. Mintz sees this as a morality detached from society itself, a sign of a new self, where self-discipline is the highest ideal. Deborah Lupton notes this virtue too, when explaining health as a moral performance (Lupton 1996). She mentions not only one, but two moral ethics: performing rationality by controlling food intake, but also the performing of emotions as an ideal. With these

two types of moralities, people should be able to assess when the right moment is for hedonistic pleasure, and when it is restrictions that are deciding people's moral attitude.

As shown, eating sugar touches upon different moralities, some of them contradictory. Through them all you can find an ideal of self-discipline in relation to both pleasure and health. Remaining healthy is seen as a sign of control, but knowing the time for pleasure is important. Enjoying sweetness together with others and giving sweet presents are seen as acts of social bonding, but at the same time these situations have to be controlled, for example through policies for consumption.

Behind these ambivalent approaches to sugar lies the assumption that all human beings prefer the taste of sweetness. This is typically explained in relation to babies' breastfeeding (Lupton 1996; Macbeth 1997) or as a specific point in the brain (Kringelbach 2010), common for all human beings. These explanations view liking for and pleasure of sweetness as a natural need with physiological locations. But sugar and sweetness are more than human biology. Sugar is related to culture and therefore bound to local moral perceptions of the good and responsible citizen. The cultural factors contributing to meanings of sweetness and sugar are complex, context bound and often contradictory. In relation hereto, it is worth noticing that one of these paradoxes is that Danes eat more than double the amount of sugar as the average European, and is the largest player in the sugar confectionery market (Ridder 2020). Thus, in spite of being a country with many explicit rules for sugar intake, Denmark still has one of the highest rates of sugar consumption of all the countries in the world. In addition, TV shows about baking are popular as never before, and cakes are often described not through the Devil but through the metaphor of angels (for example by describing a chocolate cake that 'tastes like angels singing').

At the same time, Denmark has a very strict sugar policy, not only at the political level but, as shown, also at an institutional, practical level. We still don't know much about how far this reaches into each family, but from my different times spent on fieldwork in schools I can hear the children referring to sugar as a dangerous foodstuff, an interpretation that I haven't met in other studies of children's perceptions of food. For instance, in a small-scale comparative study I conducted with two Cuban researchers (2014–2015) we asked 29 Cuban and 62 Danish children (10–14 years old) in a questionnaire about their perceptions of the nutritional value of different foodstuffs. Many of the answers were similar. For instance, both the Danish and the Cuban children defined vegetables and proteins as 'healthy' and fat as unhealthy. But the questions about sugar were answered very differently: the Danish children in general labelled sugar as very bad ('not good for anything'), whereas the Cuban children expressed a more nuanced view by answering: 'Sugar is necessary, but not too much.' By comparing the two regional attitudes towards sugar, this example indicates that Danish children perceive sugar in different ways from Cuban children. But it

also reminds us that, in order to understand specific moral understandings of sugar, you need to include an analysis of the wider context (Sanchez et al. 2019).

On the one hand, this shows how sugar – and food in general – is surrounded by often conflicting explicit ideologies or ethical regimes in the Foucauldian sense (Faubion 2012; Foucault 1990) that distinguish between good and bad, allowed and forbidden, healthy and unhealthy, and which actors may relate to in highly ambiguous and paradoxical ways. On the other hand, morality is also embodied in the most fundamental sense in the local practices of eating and the cultivation of virtue as embodied taste. Much of this logic is based on the general ambivalence of eating (Beardsworth 1990). But, when it comes to the specific food scare regarding sugar, there are more than the moral dilemmas of eating at stake. Nutrition has increasingly become a scientific topic, and at the same time both printed and digital media play a bigger and bigger role in the sharing of knowledge. The interplay between media and nutritional science amplifies the reactions to sugar (*ibid.*) and thereby helps demonize it.

Demonizing: Spreading the Panic

In 2007 a book called *Super Healthy Family* (*Kernesund Familie*) was published in Denmark (Mauritson 2007) and was from the beginning very popular. After one month it had been reprinted four times; nine years later it had been reprinted nine times and sold more than 180,000 copies. It is described as having started a movement against the authorities⁴ – and it was itself used as an authority, often mentioned as a reference for the sugar policies described in Danish children's institutions. The author is a Danish journalist, Ninka-Bernadette Mauritson, who – with her own family as an example – claims in the book that autism and other diseases can be cured by changing eating habits, e.g. by avoiding sugar, gluten, milk, rice, spaghetti and other specific food items. The reaction to the book was dramatic – both regarding the eagerness of the audience to read the personal story and the nutritional advice, which many began to follow, and from the health authorities, who warned against self-diagnosis and easy-read messages with promises of change.⁵

The book and its impact demonstrated a huge scepticism towards doctors, health authorities and experts, and praised experience-based knowledge, shared in an easy language. Nevertheless, the knowledge about how nutrition works in your body has 100 years of scientific history behind itself, many disputes between experts, and no clear conclusions seen from a scientific point of view. A weighty contribution to these debates came from the English nutritional expert John Yudkin in 1972, who with his book *Pure, White, and Deadly* depicted sugar as decidedly poisonous. He argues that intake of sugar had a greater effect on developing heart diseases than fat. This thesis, however, was not taken seriously at the time because it went against the 'fat hypotheses' developed by the American nutritional expert Ancel Keys, which stated a

connection between fatty foods and heart diseases (Keys 1953). The latter theory has for many years been significant in efforts to understand the development of modern lifestyle diseases such as overweight, heart attacks and diabetes. And it forms the backdrop to years of diet recommendations to avoid cholesterol in food (Levenstein 2012). However, several researchers have begun to side with Yudkin, and presently the damaging effect of fat is toned down, while there is an increased focus on sugar/carbohydrates metabolism. One of the more famous examples, building upon this argument, is the so-called Atkins diet, aimed to diminish the intake of carbohydrates, and lately many other sugar-free diets have been presented, in Denmark as well as in the Western world in general. Books about how to avoid sugar have become very popular, and it seems that sugar has taken over the seat from fat as the new risk factor in food. On a daily basis Danish media is full of expert opinions on the harmful effects of sugar, which cover a wide spectrum of conditions mentioned in this chapter, ranging from restless children with ADHD, risks of addiction and even crime, to overweight, diabetes and cancer.

It is not solely sugar that is the concern; carbohydrates in general are under suspicion: ‘White Bread Kills’ reads one of the headlines, and many others pave the way for diets that recommend avoiding carbohydrates in food. Danes are educated about ‘slow’ and ‘fast’ carbohydrates and ‘glycaemic index’ has become part of everyday language and is found as a marker on more and more food items. For those more inaugurated, sugar warnings are not just about the white beet sugar or the brown cane sugar but about corn syrup, the unseen sugar, that hides in everything from bread to ketchup, soda and sweets. Corn syrup is cheaper than beet or cane sugar, and traded on the world market in liquid form. It has a different molecular composition than white sugar and therefore affects the body’s physiology in different ways. It is chemically produced and contains more fructose than sucrose, a fact that is currently making it an object of attention for nutritional experts as fructose is assumed to harm the liver in the same way as alcohol (Jeppesen 2014). So, sugar is not just sugar – there is a range of different kinds of sugars, which all contain carbohydrates but are handled differently by the body and have different qualities in relation to food production. Moreover, they have different levels of sweetness, different abilities as flavour enhancers, as preservation, and in relation to fermentation processes. Milk, fruit and juice, as well as vegetables, oatmeal and bread, contain sugars. So, sugar is in some ways too wide a concept, which does not make it easier to navigate nutritional advice. Nowadays fear of food was back in time rooted in fat; now *sucrophobia* is also part of a general fear of food, including all forms of carbohydrates (Levenstein 2012).

The nutritional science behind sugar as a more or less dangerous agent in human metabolism is complex, prolonged and filled with industrial, political and scientific interests and disputes. But all these nuances are, so to say, ‘lost in translation’ when published on diverse media platforms. As Cohen writes, the Devil is a stereotype, a generalized version of a deviant agent

that has assumed destructive effects on the body (Cohen 2011 [1972], 122). When all the different negative characteristics are devoted to one imagined evil ‘figure,’ there is no space for discrimination, critical or contextual reflections. In relation to sugar, one could ask: is it the preference for sweetness that the so-called Devil controls? If this is the case, every sweet foodstuff should be abandoned. But, as shown, all that is sweet is not made of or containing sugar. Sugar, in the form of sucrose, is one thing; artificial sweetener, for instance, is another. The sweetness of a banana does not derive from the same type of molecule as the sweetness to be found in milk. How different forms of sugar (white sugar, sugar from beet roots, artificial sugar, lactose, galactose, fructose, glucose and sucrose) work in your body is still an object for many scientific studies. You could also ask whether it is any amount of sugar intake that should be fought against. Or is the aim to be able to control your intake? Are there situations where sugar, or the taste of sweetness, is acceptable? In the example of the sugar tree in the Danish kindergarten, that was certainly not the case.

Media, news and Facebook do not communicate all these uncertainties – only parts of their conclusions. And, even if the many statements and positions in this landscape seem random, they are not. They form the ground for the media pattern that generates the moral panic. Science and media collaborate on this pattern, which Cohen – inspired by disaster research – named a ‘sequential model’ (Cohen 2011 [1972], 17), covering the idea that there is a systematic and predictable relation between a threatening event and a social system that produces a reaction to this based on risk perception. This reaction is amplified through media, and thereby amplifies the perception of risk, and, as time goes on, the perception and the actual risk become more distant from each other (ibid., 16). In the actual case of sugar as a risk, it is an extra factor that science contributes to the production of uncertainty (Beardsworth 1990) through a complexity of information that cannot be communicated in short news articles or Facebook posts. Science often asks questions that people can easily relate to (‘Is this healthy or not?’ ‘Does this medicine have an impact?’), but producing stringent, valid answers to these questions is often a lifelong work process involving long education and many scientific disputes in different knowledge fields, all in a language that is not easy to translate to the public. This relation between scientific knowledge and its distribution through news media is described by Alvin M. Weinberg (1972), who named it *trans-science*. According to Beardsworth, Weinberg argued “that there exists a whole range of questions that can be asked of science, which i.e. are issues of ‘fact’ that can be framed in scientific terms, but which science itself in practice may find impossible to answer” (Beardsworth 1990, 13). As a consequence of this Beardsworth notes: “Once these trans-scientific features are acknowledged, an important and fascinating paradox begins to emerge. In contemporary society, the sciences enjoy enormous prestige and authority, and this very authority leads the public at large to expect them to deliver clearcut answers to pressing questions” (ibid., 14).

On the questions of sugar there are no clear-cut answers. The many meanings of sugar are distributed to the children, and played out in their everyday lives, as seen in the following example. During a fieldwork in a Danish school, I experienced that the children in a fifth-grade class were very aware of the content of their own and their peers' lunchboxes. For instance, some girls explained to me that they never had 'white bread' but that there were some boys in the class who always brought that. These girls were surely aware of the negative connotations, not only of sugar but of carbohydrates in general. Seemingly, it was important for them to communicate this moral standpoint to me. But, when the same children entered the after-school institution there were no comments on sugar or carbohydrates. When asking them, 'Where does your food taste the best, in school or in the after-school institution?' they all agreed that it was best to eat in the after-school institution. This meal often consisted of white bread – but, unlike the school context, there were no worries among the children over eating this. Instead, the children here stressed the cosy situation the meal established in the after-school institution. In the school a lunch break is normally ten minutes where you eat your private lunch bag at each your table (and are seemingly being watched by the others). In the after-school institution, the meal is a common action where you share the bread and produce grilled sandwiches together and eat them around the same table. This observation could point to the school as an arena that contributes to the development of moral panic to a higher degree than the after-school institution. It corresponds with the idea that a Danish after-school institution is seen as a space for free expression and play, in opposition to the school, which has to civilize its pupils (Højlund 2004). And it shows again how complex and context-dependent the perceptions of sugar are.

But, even if there is no one-way line between scientific discourses, media disputes and practices in the individual Danish families, the moral attitude towards sugar certainly plays a role, which this last example will show. During an experimental fieldwork at the annual Aarhus Food Festival, our research group – together with some anthropology students – had invented a table with ten different foodstuffs on it. Five of these were food items that we assumed would provoke opinions about sugar – for example chocolate, white bread, sweets – while others were part of 'a healthy diet' discourse, such as vegetables, brown bread and fruit. Our informants were families with children, and they were asked to choose five items of the ten for a picnic bag. They had to discuss and negotiate on which to choose, and these conversations gave us a good understanding on how the different family members valued different food. One thing was very dominant: it was the mothers who decided in the end what should be part of the common lunch bag, such as in the family where a boy preferred the white bread, and took one piece in order to place it in the hypothetical lunch bag. But he was stopped by the force of his mother, who, with a hand on his arm, explained to her son, 'No, we don't want the white bread. In our family we prefer brown bread.'

The Sugar Drama

The arguments against sugar are rooted in both science and religion, not as oppositions but in an interesting and conflated continuum between the two, Elizabeth Walker Mechling and Jay Mechling argue (1983). According to them, this *moral rhetoric* follows a pattern: sugar is seen as *pollution*, bringing *guilt* to the consumer, either because of a weak self, an evil industry or a craving brain. This disorder asks for *purification* through parental or nutritionist intervention, or through symbolic rituals, as for example the fall of the sugar tree in the kindergarten. By going through these phases, one can return to *redemption*: freedom of sin (ibid., 22). To them, these ways to understand and tell stories about sugar represent more than knowledge about the material itself. It is stories that reflect societal structures, dilemmas grounded in a larger, dramatic history, where both the Bible and science play significant roles. The sugar drama is amplified by public texts, books, news, social media etc. The fundamental story of the Fall engages people because we are in need of public rituals to teach us how to cope with, control and include *temptation* in our lives (ibid.; see also Allen 2002).

During the last 50 years sugar has undergone a dramatic change of symbolic meaning in Danish society, from being a comforting treat for children to now being seen as a threatening foodstuff that needs to be regulated through sugar policy at the children's institutions. As shown, this development can be explained as generated in a media-driven space between science, religion and society. The reactions to scientific messages presented in simplified forms and formats become guidelines for nutritional fear and lifestyle ideologies that are again reproduced and amplified through media responses. The scientific messages get help from the basic religious metaphors, as the Devil, and the media retell the story of the Fall in a scientific language. The reason why the head of the kindergarten in the introductory example could make the drastic change of a tradition was due to this ideological climate paving the way for a new approach to practices of eating in the Danish children's institutions. This chapter has thus shown that moral panic can be related to something other than human beings, and has pointed to how the uncertainties of science in collaboration with different media platforms contribute to the process of producing moral panic. The threat is not 'the other' but 'the self' with a body that is a bio-political entity, in a society generated by science and statistics (Poovey 1995).

When analysing sugar consumption in everyday life, it is important to remember that discourses, science and media debates do not determine practice. As shown in the empirical examples in some situations, the fear of sugar and carbohydrates is dominating – whereas in other situations the health moralities are downplayed, and the pleasures of sweetness put in front, as when the families are striving for *hygge* (the special Danish concept for a cosy situation, often with others), or when children are sitting around a table in the after-school institution, or at home getting 'Friday candy'. So, when it comes to sugar,

it's not all about panic, and it is not in every situation that the Devil is present. Sometimes he is exchanged with angels. These dramas between the good and the bad are always played out in a specific sociological and historical context. The moral demand of controlling desires and temptations is part of a complex everyday sugar consumption, but this complexity is not reflected in the many public statements and advice aimed at children.

It still remains, though, to dig deeper into the potential reasons for why both sugar restrictions and high sugar consumption have become specific to Danish food culture, perhaps more than in other food cultures.

Notes

- ¹ The examples in this chapter are observations across different projects about food and children I was involved in during 2012–2016.
- ² Danish children's song by Elisabeth Gjerluff Nielsen and Barbara Gjerluff Nyholm 2008. Also see Henrik Boysen: 'Det lille tip: Undgå det hvide drys [blog entry]' (<http://theangrybeautynerd.bloggersdelight.dk/2014/02/det-lille-tip-undga-det-hvide-drys-2/>, accessed 27 January 2020).
- ³ See Helle Lauritsen, 'Sukker gør børn urolige' (*Folkeskolen*, 6 March 2003, <https://www.folkeskolen.dk/16732/sukker-goer-boern-urolige>, accessed 20 January 2020).
- ⁴ See Lasse Lavrsen, 'En krig, der kun havde ofre' (*Information*, 8 March 2014, <https://www.information.dk/moti/2014/03/krig-kun-ofre>, accessed 10 January 2021).
- ⁵ See 'Slaget på spisebordet' (*Dagens medicin*, 9 September 2008, <https://dagensmedicin.dk/slaget-pa-spisebordet/> [subscription required], accessed 10 January 2021).

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