FOODWAYS AND IDENTITY

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Narratives of Life History Told Through Family Recipes

Abstract
Our foodways are an important marker of our identity; they are as much a marker of our identity as language and culture. Food signifies our values, beliefs, traditions, and heritage. From everyday meals to holiday feasts, food is celebrated, often shared, and used as a tool in communication. These culinary marks of identity are acquired early in life through the transmission of knowledge within family foodways, where more than just recipes are learned—narratives of life histories are shared. It is precisely this process that cements food as an integral part of identity development. However, this transmission of knowledge seems to have decreased with the popularization of prepared foods, how-to recipe videos, and pre-measured meal kits as solutions to more demanding workloads and faster-paced lifestyles. This raises concerns for the loss of familial ties and the authentic self, since preparing meals and experiencing the teaching process through family foodways has significant impact in meaning making and identity formation.

Introduction
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However, this transmission of knowledge seems to have decreased with the popularization of prepared foods, how-to recipe videos, and pre-measured meal kits as solutions to more demanding workloads and faster-paced lifestyles. This raises concerns for the loss of familial ties and the authentic self, since preparing meals and experiencing the teaching process through family foodways has significant impact in meaning-making and identity formation.

**Methods**

This research aims to understand the changing food landscape of traditional family meals through an auto-ethnographic approach. A form of qualitative research, autoethnography is a subjective observation and exercise in reflexivity predicated on the author's personal experience. In choosing to do an autoethnography, it is important to understand its uses and limitations. From a purely subject viewpoint, submersed in your own experience, heavy bias is a considerable argument for the social science use of this type of research. However, understanding what it means to be reflexive and able to place yourself in a subjective stance is fundamental to cultural anthropology and future ethnographic work. For me, as a young anthropologist, I believe that it is important to apply both the subjective and objective to all things human, as in the study of the humanities, you cannot have one without the other. Furthermore, in the field of Food Studies, an individual centered approach to food is indicative of larger cultural trends; as I will discuss in this paper, food is a signifier of culture, intimately tied to identity.

Focusing on the personal histories of the women in my own immediate and extended family, this study is contextualized through experiencing the teaching process. In recounting the participant observations conducted with the women in my family, I provide a narrative of the reproduction process followed by a reflexive analysis, applying anthropological concepts and previous research to my own experience. First, I explore the background of food, memory, and identity as linked to selfhood. Then I reproduce my grandmother's spaghetti and meatballs and analyze this recipe, and, finally, I reproduce my grandmother-in-law's pizza with analysis. While looking at family history, origins of recipes, and food traditions, transmission of knowledge through cooking reveals: the connection between family foodways and identity, the loss of traditional knowledge, and the reproduction of recipes through contemporary outlets. Where other aspects of foodways overlap, such as cross-cultural food knowledge, women as bearers of knowledge, and recipes as oral family heirlooms, I touch on themes within other food and identity research. Examining my own family history and foodways experience through an anthropological and auto-ethnographic lens sheds light on the importance of preserving traditional family food practices in shaping identity.

**Food, Memory, & Identity**

We eat food commonly and extraordinarily, boringly and excitingly, to celebrate life and to mourn death, when we are sad, when we are happy, when we are on a date, when we are sitting at our work desk, or when we are sitting on the couch. We use food to communicate, commemorate, and to remember significant events. There are specific foods we prepare depending on the event, but there are also specific foods we eat just because. Maybe there is a special dish you have at Christmas or for your birthday. Maybe there is a specific food you enjoy when you are watching your favorite show or because it is Saturday night. When we think back to these events, memories are conjured and tied to the foods we prepare and eat during these moments of our lives. These moments make up the whole of who we are and as Abarca and Colby (2016, 2) put it, "[...] food, beyond being a biological necessity, is inseparable from powerful material and symbolic realities." For me, it was Kraft macaroni and cheese after school, while watching *Full House*, deviled eggs and shrimp cocktail at family Christmas, and my grandmother's spaghetti and meatballs on New Year's Day.

To me, my grandmother's spaghetti and meatballs that were clearly the most meaningful of all the foods I relished eating. This I realized when one of my first thoughts after her passing was of the fact that I had never formally learned how to make her recipe. I only had bits and pieces of it from memories. These fragments and
snapshots of moments spent counting meatballs, testing sauce and listening to her stories about our family, were significant to my formation of self. Alone, story, food, and memory are embodied in the everyday processes and events of our lives. However, together they are representative of the qualities of one’s individual selfhood (Abarca and Colby 2016, 4). In my own life, I was confronted with this connection when I lost my grandmother, and my own identity was shaken. My memory of the meals she made and the knowledge she imparted onto me was so much a part of my selfhood, but I feared without the know-how to prepare her food, my memories, her stories, and my own sense of self were at risk of being lost as well. In this paper, I continue the auto-ethnographic exploration that started with that realization and attempt to uncover how food can shape one’s personal identity.

First, how do we define identity? Moreover, how do we look at it through an anthropological lens? In his book Food, Drink and Identity historian and Food Studies scholar Peter Scholliers (2001, 5) answers this question by asserting,

Social theorists claim that “identity” is crucial to all people: it allows one to situate oneself and the Other, to give a sense to existence, and to order the world; it forges norms and values. Identity contributes to how individuals and groups perceive and construct society, how they give meaning, and how they (re)act, think, vote, socialise, buy, rejoice, perceive, work, eat, judge or relax.

So, if all these aspects of one’s life make up their individual identities, including that of eating, how then do foodways fit into identity? Social scientists have explored the concept of identity, finding food to be integrally connected to sentiments of selfhood. This reinforces the assertion that feelings of collectivity and kinship are strengthened via food’s symbolic representation in language, taboos, preparation, consumption, commensality, and conviviality (Scholliers 2001, 7). In brief, food and identity are intricately laced into that which we do every day: eat. But how is it that family foodways affect identity development? Through the teaching process and reproduction of recipes in family foodways, transmission of knowledge and narratives within give way to formative moments that shape identity.

**Gran’s Spaghetti and Meatballs**

It was a chilly Saturday morning in November. My mother and I were attempting to reproduce my late grandmother’s traditional recipe of spaghetti and meatballs, for the purposes of this study. My mother, Barbara, is in her sixties and now lives alone in the house she shared with my grandmother. Although spaghetti and meatballs are an Italian dish in its origin, it is not representative of our heritage, as we are predominantly Irish and Scottish. Nonetheless, this traditional family recipe is an extraordinary meal reserved for New Year’s Day. When I thought about how our spaghetti and meatballs New Year’s tradition began, I could not recall a starting point; it was as if it had always been this way. I asked my mother about this tradition and its origins, and she replied: “It started one year, when your brother asked for it, although I can’t remember exactly when. It was a long time ago.” This prompted me to inquire about the origin of the recipe. To my surprise, it did not start with my grandmother: “Grandma learned it from your great-grandmother.” I do not know how my great-grandmother came to know it, but in recalling when I was a little girl and learning to make her Five Cup Fruit Salad, I remembered the stories she would tell me about my great-grandfather: him being a war hero in WWII, daily life during that time and rationing, or about her love of baseball.

On our way to the store, my mother and I had been discussing what ingredients to buy and could not remember the amounts and types of canned tomatoes that were used. Although we both had helped my grandmother make this dish, neither of us had been present for the entire process. Gran never measured anything, nor wrote anything down, and had only orally given me the recipe, but I never formally learned it. Thus, mom and I had to pool our collective memories. We had agreed on four, four, and four: 4 cans of tomato sauce, 4 cans of tomato paste, and 4 cans of peeled whole
tomatoes. Spaghetti sauce was made this way in our family, because when it was transferred from my great-grandmother to my grandmother, pre-made sauces did not exist and neither did Google.

While staring at a wall of canned tomatoes, in varying ounces and types, my mother said, “Grandma liked Red Gold, but whatever you choose, do not get Hunt’s. Grandma hated that brand.” I instantly remembered a conversation I had with my grandmother about that subject and to this day I do not buy Hunt’s products. My mother explained that she remembered as a little girl helping my grandmother make the meatballs and when it was time to add them to the sauce, “she would count them as she put them in.” I asked why. “I don’t know, maybe it was to teach me how to count? Maybe she just wanted to see how many she had made. One time, I remember we had counted 72.” As we prepared the meal, my mother gave me some tips about: browning the meatballs, starting everything early so the meatballs could simmer in the sauce all day (this was an important element as “that is what gives the sauce its flavor”), how my grandmother “only used a garlic press because that is how she learned,” and how she would base the amount of garlic on “[her sense of] smell.”

Six hours later, we had something close to what looked and tasted similar to my grandmother’s recipe. Yet, it did not taste quite the same, and we decided that it was possible a step has been lost. What struck me after the fact was not the semi-successful reproduction of the recipe—although this effort with my mother reassured the continuation of this tradition—but the flood of memories about stories I had heard or facts I learned about my family history while cooking with my grandmother and great-grandmother.

**Reflection**

In realizing that neither my mother nor I could confidently remember the recipe in its entirety, I understood the departure from the transmission of knowledge in preparing family meals. It had become common practice, as life became more hectic, that we often opted for the convenience of fast-food or prepackaged foods in place of cooking meals from scratch. Though some meals were prepared on a semi-regular basis, those specific to certain events or holiday traditions where collectivity was necessary, are markedly significant. Cappellini and Parsons (2012, 7), in *Sharing the Meal*, explain extraordinary meals as those reserved for the collective experience and assert that, “sharing extraordinary meals reinforces familial bonds and perpetuates familial roles and norms.” I note that throughout this portion of my study it was the flood of memories about stories told by grandmother and great-grandmother: that became a large part of the cooking process. In her own memories of cooking with my grandmother, my mother recalled learning how to count by counting meatballs. The associations of these moments with the food we were reproducing reveal the connection between foodways and their importance to upbringing and identity development (Chen, 2013, 11). Ultimately, these moments that formed my memories, informed my decisions, and instilled the knowledge I have, in-part construct the person I am today.

The collective practice of cooking follows a similar path to identity development as the creative process does. As a painter takes inspiration from her training and, with it, produces a unique artwork, when we learn to cook with others, we take in that which is imparted, internalizing it and externally expressing a unique, personal form. Thus, as social work student Tammie Chen writes in her analysis of learning to cook as it pertains to, “This process is very similar to the process of personal identity development and can be translated to both the family and cultural arena.” (Chen, 2013, 5).

In other words, collectively producing and consuming with family encourages one’s identity development through the creativity of the cooking process. Though loss of technical knowledge and methods in cooking traditional recipes occurs, the reproduction ensures the longevity of the dish. Thus, this process is ongoing and changing through reproduction of lost knowledge and the discovery of renewed selfhood. Because I had to reproduce this recipe from memory without the original information or tools, I created a reprodu-
tion that although is based on the original, is certainly no facsimile. It is rather my own take on the recipe, one still carrying my family history within its origin.

Through my family foodways, I have a unique and rooted sense of self that is framed within the process of food production and transmission of knowledge that went beyond the recipes. Recalling my own experiences with extraordinary meals within my family, such as my brother requesting spaghetti and meatballs on New Year’s past, I am reminded of how this recipe became rooted in my identification. In requesting and receiving food as a signifier of a celebration or ritual event, the act becomes tradition, cementing its importance and meaning (Humphrey, 1989, 166).

**Minnie’s Pizza**

It was a Saturday afternoon, the weekend before Thanksgiving, and my mother-in-law, Mel, was preparing bread dough in her fifth-floor apartment kitchen. She had agreed to help me with my research but warned me that the dough was going to be a much bigger batch than was necessary for pizza, as she was also making bread for turkey stuffing. Mel is in her sixties and lives with her husband, Mike, a block away from her son and me. She is originally from New Castle, Pennsylvania, which she claims is “85% Italian.” However, Mel is not Italian. She was born to parents of English, Irish, Dutch, and French descent.

As she started to mix the flour, salt, yeast and water, she began to talk about Minnie, her mother-in-law. Minnie was an Italian American woman, born in the U.S. to immigrant parents from Italy. As Mel kneaded the dough she explained, “Minnie learned to cook from her mom, but she added in her own spins and worked as a professional cook in restaurant kitchens.” When I asked if there were other family members that knew this recipe, Mel replied, “Her eldest daughter knows it, I know it, and now you know it.” To my surprise, as far as Mel was aware, only three people knew this recipe. This prompted me to inquire about how the recipe was transmitted to Mel. Three months before Mel and Mike were married, Minnie came to stay with them. Mel explained, “I wanted to learn everything, I watched her and took notes. Then she would watch me. She taught me every-thing I know [about cooking].” Mel had spent those three months watching, taking notes, and reproducing Minnie’s recipes, exactly how Minnie had taught her – listening to stories and learning about the history of her soon to be family-in-law, along the way.

Thinking about this process and the transmission of food knowledge from mother-in-law to a soon to be daughter-in-law, I asked Mel about her own mother and what if any food knowledge was shared. Mel explained that life in her mother’s kitchen was much different: “My mother liked to keep a clean kitchen and never wasted food. She cooked, portioned and plated our meals. We were allowed to help with setting the table and cleaning up.” While explaining that her mother preferred to keep the process of cooking a solo affair, opting to delegate labor, Mel was checking on her proved dough. The dough had tripled in size, and Mel exclaimed “Thank you, Minnie!” Excited by the successful consistency of the dough, ready to be portioned, rolled out, and topped with the sauce, cheese, peppers, and pepperoni, I asked Mel about the ingredients. Mel explained that many of the ingredients that Minnie originally used have been substituted or completely replaced due to price, orientations toward health consciousness, items having been phased out during the rise of pre-packaged foods, and loss of traditional ingredients due to acculturation of American cuisine on Italian foodways.

Throughout my time with Mel, making her mother-in-law’s traditional pizza, Mel spoke about many things regarding her immediate and extended family history including: the “very different ways mealtimes were from my family to Mike’s family” outlining the difference from small, formal mealtimes with her family vs the large, informal mealtimes with Mike’s family; tips about preparing the pizza when you are “in a pinch” according to Minnie, who also thought Hunt’s was terrible; more about Minnie, such as how “she had an industrial sized mixer bolted to her tiny apartment kitchen...
Reflection

There is much to unpack here, such as the reoccurring theme of women as bearers of knowledge, recipes as oral family heirlooms, the cross-cultural transmission of foodways, and the history behind the assimilation and acculturation of Italian cuisine. Although some of these topics are beyond the scope of this study, my discussion of the relationship between foodways and identity formation must acknowledge my unique experience with cross-cultural transmission and women as the authoritarians of this knowledge.

Everything that I know about food and cooking, save for a few recipes from male celebrity chefs and their cookbooks, I learned from the women in my life. More often than not, it is the women, specifically mothers, that are the authoritarians of recipe transmission. This claim is echoed by Humphrey (1989, 164) as he explains,

"These nurturers of the family do most of the cooking and therefore "own" the recipes. In this sense, recipes are similar to proverbs in that they are passed on vertically from authority figures more often than they are passed along horizontally. A good family recipe has the same weight and power as good family advice."

Many times, these lessons about recipes are accompanied by the origins and family history of the dish, as well as edifying narratives of personal experiences. The narrative could be a story about the cooking process itself, such as the time Mel lost her press-on nail in a batch of 100 raviolis and learned "this is why you don't cook with manicured nails." Alternately, the story could be something more personal and informative about our family history. It is through women and cooking that in some of our most impressive life moments, we learn important lessons about not just the recipes themselves, but also about our own histories. Moreover, these lessons and histories are encompassed by that which we can materialize, food. This tangible material is held within the recipes that get passed along and through their reproduction, we are reminded of those formative moments (Parveen, 2016, 51). Food carries with it these processes and opens dialogues for which we may not have in any other setting or under any other circumstances.

Although this had been neither the first time I had cooked with Mel, nor the first time I made this pizza recipe, doing so with an autoethnographic approach led to a unique and insightful experience. I had renewed my knowledge of the recipe and gained new information about my adopted family. I had begun to miss a person I had never met, Minnie, and identified with stories that Mel imparted on me of our Italian family-in-law. This is not to say that I identify as Italian, but that at some level, these Italian dishes hold sway over a piece of my personal identity. Not only has my grandmother's spaghetti and meatballs become a mainstay in my food repertoire, but now I have included a pizza recipe two generations removed from the homeland of Italy, via my mother-in-law. Dottolo and Dottolo (2018, xiv) state that "food is impressed upon a core development of self, whether or not that self is affirmed, resisted, or transformed." Whether it be the acculturation of Italian foodways into the American cuisine or the adoption into my extended Italian family, these dishes and the family histories imparted on and instilled in me, have transformed my identity. Identity formation through cross-cultural transmission, transcends geological lines and incorporates new histories.

Conclusion

The processes of culinary production and transmission of knowledge through family foodways exemplified here has shown how narratives within give way to family histories and processes that shape identity. Where memory, narrative, and identity intersect, food and the practice of learning produce experiences that significantly impact familial bonds and meaning-making in identity development. Through my autoethnographic analysis, I show how in the formation of tradition and sharing extraordinary meals, legacies of family history, and food continue to live through our reproduction of recipes. The lack of this exposure due to decreases in
meal preparation, opting for convenience, reveals a likely loss in both tradition and personal identity—rooted in family meal preparation and knowledge transmission.

Although recipes and culinary know-how exist in popular media and prepared foods offer convenience from time-consuming meal production, I have found that the collective process and conviviality of producing and consuming food with family offer a more meaningful connection to selfhood. I invite more inquiry into this topic as further research would be beneficial in comparing these findings to a larger and more diverse group. Touching on the creative process through reproduction of recipes lends itself to forming and expressing the authentic self. Further research could benefit this area of identity development through culinary practices by contrasting and comparing experiences between individual learning through media and collective learning through family.

References


