

Research report

Masculinity and food ideals of men who live alone

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Abstract

Most studies of social aspects of foods have focused on people in multi-person households, often from the perspective of women. Little is known about the food-related experiences of men who live alone. We therefore conducted a qualitative study with 12 men aged 27–47 who lived alone in Vancouver, Canada. Our goals were to explore their food-related ideals, and their perceptions of how those ideals relate to their actual food practices, the context of living alone, and masculine identities. Data were collected through food journals and semi-structured interviews. The men's ideals included being conscious and organized with respect to food so that they could regularly eat meals prepared at home from healthy ingredients. Eating with others was considered an ideal food context, where the meal became an “occasion”, as opposed to “just eating”. Participants believed that their eating habits often did not live up to these ideals because of lack of time and because the context of living alone was not conducive to eating well. However, they thought their habits were better than what they perceived to be the habits of a stereotypical bachelor who does not know how to cook and has a ‘who cares’ attitude towards food.

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Introduction

Nutrition surveys continue to demonstrate gaps between nutrition recommendations and the eating habits of people in developed countries, despite an abundance of foods to choose from and ubiquitous nutrition education messages (Garriguet, 2006; Hoare et al., 2004; Moshfegh, Goldman, & Cleveland, 2005). This has led to a growing body of literature examining the factors and processes shaping people's everyday eating practices. Food choices are now seen to result from the complex interplay of individual, interpersonal, social, cultural and environmental determinants (Raine, 2005; Wetter et al., 2001). The specific foods individuals select reflect not only their ideals, values and priorities regarding food and eating, but also structural factors experienced over the lifecourse that shape the personal food choice system, such as the food environment, economic context, family and peer influences, household structure, and gender (Bisogni, Connors, Devine, & Sobal, 2002; Furst, Connors, Bisogni, Sobal, & Falk, 1996). Food habits can thus be conceptualized as specific everyday practices

that are intimately related to ideals or discourses that are in turn constructed in relation to macro social structures. However, despite recent interest in food choice processes, relatively few studies have examined the role of food-related ideals or discourse as intermediate between macro social constructs and micro everyday practices.

Most of the research exploring social aspects of food practices has focused on the experiences of people in multi-person households, particularly heterosexual couples with and without children (Bove, Sobal, & Rauschenbach, 2003; Charles & Kerr, 1988; DeVault, 1991; Kemmer, Anderson, & Marshall, 1998; Lupton, 2000). Findings have demonstrated that other household members are perceived to influence individuals' personal food habits, resulting in a healthier diet and enhanced enjoyment around food (Kemmer et al., 1998). Food practices can also be a site of conflict within the family and a location where gender-based power inequalities are enacted (Bove et al., 2003; Charles & Kerr, 1988; DeVault, 1991). Women continue to be responsible for the bulk of domestic food work, despite their increased participation in paid employment outside the home (Lake et al., 2006; Lupton, 2000; Sullivan, 2000).

In comparison, very little is known about the food-related experiences of people who live alone (Jensen & Holm, 1999). It is important to address this gap, as the number of one-person

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households is increasing in many countries (National Agency for Enterprise and Housing, 2004; Statistics Canada, 2002a; U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). In Canada, for example, one-person households increased from about 20% of all households in 1981 to just over 25% in 2001, when 10% of Canadians lived in one-person households (Statistics Canada, 2002a). In 2003, one-person households in 14 EU countries ranged from 13% of households in Spain to 46% in Sweden (National Agency for Enterprise and Housing, 2004). Although some of this increase is due to the aging of these populations, a higher proportion of younger people are also choosing to live alone (Statistics Canada, 2002b). Empirical data show that people who live alone spend more money per person on food and a higher proportion of their food dollar eating out (Blisard & Stewart, 2007; Statistics Canada, 2003). They also consume less adequate diets (Gerrior et al., 1995). In addition, one-person households represent a unique context with respect to commensal aspects of food habits. In contemporary society, most people frequently eat an evening meal with members of their immediate family. People who live alone, however, tend to eat with friends more often (Sobal & Nelson, 2003).

It is likely that the processes by which social context shapes the food practices of people who live alone differ for men and women. Studies of the meanings of food show consistent associations between gender and specific foods, where meat (especially red meat), alcohol, and hearty portion sizes are associated with masculinity, while vegetables, fruit, fish and sour dairy products (e.g., yogurt, cottage cheese) are associated with femininity (Jensen & Holm, 1999; Sobal, 2005). Current nutrition education messages promote diets high in ‘feminine’ foods, with reduced consumption of ‘masculine’ foods. Not surprisingly, then, men’s diets are typically understood to be unhealthy, men are often seen as lacking knowledge regarding healthy eating and needing guidance from women and health experts, and interest in healthy eating is seen as women’s domain (Gough, 2007; Jensen & Holm, 1999). Everyday domestic cooking is also constructed as women’s domain. Although media images of men cooking are not uncommon, men’s cooking is associated with manly foods (e.g., grilling steak or wild game), special accomplishments or events, and little attention to the food preferences and needs of other family members (Hollows, 2003; Inness, 2001).

These themes are echoed in the findings of qualitative studies of masculinity and food conducted in England (Gough & Conner, 2006), Finland (Roos, Prattala, & Koski, 2001), and Norway (Roos & Wandel, 2005). These studies take a social constructionist perspective of gender, where gender is viewed as an active and dynamic social structure (Courtenay, 2000). Men and women enact varied gendered identities through attitudes and behaviors that their culture associates with different versions of masculinity and femininity. Practices associated with the most valued or normative way of being a man form hegemonic masculinity, but alternative patterns of masculinity with different relations to authority and social power are also apparent (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The studies of masculinity and food have shown that, in their discussions of eating, diet and health, the men’s comments

tended to reflect traditional constructions of masculinity that position food and health promoting behaviors as of little interest to men (Courtenay, 2000). The men usually spoke of eating as habitual and routine, and as necessary to fuel their bodies. Although they were aware of healthy eating guidelines, they often showed some skepticism and resistance to nutrition education messages, and described healthy eating as monotonous and unsatisfying. However, there were also indications of alternative constructions of masculinity (Sobal, 2005). Some men did express interest in food, cooking, and health, and indicated that they were reducing their consumption of red meat and increasing consumption of vegetables. These alternative experiences with food were more commonly expressed by engineers than by carpenters or drivers, suggesting that social class may mediate associations between masculinity and food (Roos et al., 2001; Roos & Wandel, 2005).

The role of family structure was not specifically addressed in these studies of men’s experiences with food, although most participants were married. No research has examined how the relationships between food practices and masculinities are implicated in the everyday food practices of men who live alone. It seems likely that single men would construct their eating habits quite differently than married or cohabiting men, given that they are not dealing with household gender relations and power dynamics, and that there is no woman in the home to be the default provisioner of meals and nutrition expertise (DeVault, 1991; Gough, 2007).

The exploratory study presented in this paper was thus designed to examine the everyday food practices of men who live alone. Given our theoretical understanding that food practices are shaped by ideals or discourses that are in turn constructed in relation to macro social structures, we particularly wanted to understand participants’ food-related ideals, how they understood the relationships between their food practices and ideals, and how their food practices, ideals, and understandings arose from the specific social context at the intersection of masculinity and living alone. Building on the work of Furst et al. (1996), we use the term ‘ideals’ to refer to people’s standards, expectations, hopes and beliefs for how they should eat. Ideals can have many forms, such as symbolic meaning, ethics, or traditions, and can function as point of reference to which people compare and judge their own food habits.

Methods

Our research is based in a constructionist approach, which assumes that people actively construct the meaning of their social world through interactions with each other, that multiple meanings of social phenomenon coexist, and that researchers are active participants in the knowledge creation process (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). We used a qualitative research approach, as this method is particularly suitable when exploring a complex topic that requires access to participants’ lived experiences and where little prior knowledge is available (Mason, 1996). All study procedures were approved by the University of British Columbia’s ethics committee.

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