



WORKSHOP ABSTRACT

Anthropology, loneliness and food practices. Contemporary theories and ethnographies

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Abstract: The relationship between culture and food has been widely addressed, including how cultural changes affect eating. In recent years, loneliness has emerged as a central concern on the political agenda in the European context. Most of the research on loneliness has been conducted from psychological or biomedical approaches, but we know less about the cultural construction and diversity of experiences circumscribed under a category that is difficult to delimit. Anthropology has recently approached the phenomenon of loneliness with its methodological proposals. This panel is inscribed in this contemporary trend, focusing on the relationship between Loneliness and Food.

The analysis of loneliness from food practices or the influence of loneliness on food choices and behaviors are less addressed issues. A widely shared thesis in the discipline assumes that parallels are drawn between culinary complexity and social complexity. By defining food as a field of culture, it has been constructed in relational terms of encounter with the other, re-creating spaces of identity or ritual significance. Eating practices express and set in motion social and affective processes and relationships that make sense within a specific historical, social and personal context. Eating alone, unaccompanied, reduces the space of eating, impoverishing and limiting it, turning the food context into "just eating"

Analyses of culture have taken for granted the participation and interaction between people. This panel approaches this relationship from an inverted point of view: we are interested in knowing the cultural reality of these spaces of solitude - of non-encounters with an other - from the analysis of the impact on food practices. We are interested in theoretical or ethnographic works on the processes of supply and use, food preferences, modes of preparation, culinary ideologies or spaces of sociability that are modified by feelings of loneliness or situations of social isolation.

SESSION SCHEDULE

Wednesday, September 25, 2024 | Slot 1 | Room 2

Elena Freire Paz, David Conde Caballero & Lorenzo Mariano Juárez: Loneliness, food and ageing. Notes for an ethnography in Spain.

Amanda Krzyworzeka: Loneliness of farmers as a side-effect of modernising the food-production industry in Poland

Constantine S.L. Loum: FOOD AS A 'COMPANION' IN LONELINESS: A REVIEW OF FOOD CULTURE AMONG ACHOLI PEOPLE OF NORTHERN UGANDA.

Tereza Kroužková: Elderhood, taste and loneliness: food as a mirror of social change

Wednesday, September 25, 2024 | Slot 2 | Room 2

Adrija Basu: Memory, Melancholia, Malady, and Meal: Tracing the impact of loneliness and food on motherhood in Jhumpa Lahiri's works

Jinghan Ma: Binge Eating to Fill the Emptiness: Voices from Young Urban Women in Contemporary China

Diego Allen-perkins: Eating alone in old age: An ethnography of the food practices among older adults in La Vera, Spain

Cut Fatimatuzzahra: "I Don't Want to Look Miserable": Solo Dining Culture In the Eyes of Indonesian Young Adults

SESSION PAPERS

Loneliness of farmers as a side-effect of modernising the food-production industry in Poland

Amanda Krzyworzeka

This paper addresses the question of loneliness and food in a slightly different way than usual, from the angle of production rather than that of consumption. Since joining the European Union, Polish agriculture has changed significantly and on many different levels. There are fewer farms now, as small farms have been liquidated and those that survived are on average bigger than 20 years ago. They are much more mechanized, technically advanced and much better funded (mainly with credits and EU subsidies). Due to socio-cultural changes, not many young people want to stay in the villages and continue farming, they tend to get higher education and migrate to cities. Many women choose to work in non-farming jobs as well.

My ethnographic research was conducted among Polish farmers and during my fieldwork I realized that changing modes of production of food leads to a growing loneliness of farmers, who now longer have their family members as co-workers and as people with whom they can discuss everyday farming problems. At the same time, as the workload is getting greater (with bigger farms and demanding lifestyle), their meetings with other farmers are getting rarer. As a result, loneliness seems to be a new and very significant part of farmers' life, accompanied by the increasing frustration, which seems to grow despite increasing wealth. This phenomenon seems interesting in the face of recent farmers protests, which on the surface regarded the EU's Green Deal, but in fact was also a protest against changes in values and ways of life.

This issue could be an addition to the discussion about loneliness and food, as the issue of food's origin and the way it is produced is getting more important to many consumers.

FOOD AS A 'COMPANION' IN LONELINESS: A REVIEW OF FOOD CULTURE AMONG ACHOLI PEOPLE OF NORTHERN UGANDA.

Constantine S.L. Loum

In Acholi culture, eating 'alone' depicts someone who is not willing to share with others; food is for sharing, meaning eating alone translates into a social problem with the person concerned. Food is central among the Acholi people of northern Uganda; Acholi culture boasts some of the most diverse and richest array of culinary delights one can get in Uganda and the East African region combined, comprising both vegetables and animal products. In Acholi culture, food is 'companionship'; as such there is no such thing as eating alone.

Modern living has had profound impact on how the Acholi people live today; social challenges arising from globalisation has affected communal eating in the Acholi spaces, hence the narrative about 'loneliness' has found its way into the spaces once occupied by food sharing, which now affects the kind of food choices that the Acholi people make. The spaces for food sharing in Acholi culture are embedded in the tradition of the people which compares very well among other African tribes and culture. In many African Cultures, 'A meal is not merely filling one's stomach', that is mere satisfaction of a biological necessity. In Acholi culture, there are various occasions where food or meals has distinct purpose in addition to the biological requirements.

Hence deciphering the purpose of food in the spaces enshrined in the Acholi culture is crucial; also understanding how modern living has encroached in these spaces and allowed for 'loneliness' to disrupt this spaces and bring about new ways in which food is used to fill the gap is important because in many instances communal eating is being eroded even if it still plays important role in keeping people together on important occasions reminiscent of the good old days of cultural joy of eating as a family or friends.

Elderhood, taste and loneliness: food as a mirror of social change

Tereza Kroužková

Ageing brings many health challenges, ranging from partial mobility problems to total disability. However, the difficult challenges include not only overcoming health impairments but also the social changes that people face as they move into old age. One aspect of life that brings its own specific challenges in old age is eating. Our tastes change with age, as does our ability to accept certain types and consistencies of food, and we must adapt to this. The set-up of how we have been used to eating all our lives, whether it was lunches at work or shared dinners at the family table, also changes. However, as time goes on, fewer and fewer people sit down at that table, until one day you are dining alone.

The ethnographic research conducted by a team of anthropologists and sociologists in the home households of senior citizens living in Prague and Brno was based on observation, interviews and a questionnaire survey. Its aim was to try to uncover, through the perspective of the anthropology of food and the sociology of ageing, the basic

adaptive mechanisms of the Czech senior population living in large cities, by which the participants of our research maintain, through their active resistance, their enjoyment of food, which is not obvious in times of the ageing trials.

The conference paper will try to cover what role the enjoyment of food can play in old age, what adaptive methods Czech seniors use to maintain and induce it, what patterns can be observed in the relationship between health limitations and types of resilience, and what role their loved ones and their environment play in all this.

Memory, Melancholia, Malady, and Meal: Tracing the impact of loneliness and food on motherhood in Jhumpa Lahiri's works

Adrija Basu

Globalization and multiculturalism have widened the horizons of the “eating culture” to transform local experiences into planetary ones. As a result, the intimate consumption patterns assume a more social profile. Furthermore, these practices have led food to become a “cultural capital,” which has further paved the way for “culinary writing” that depicts the socio-cultural experiences of various characters in terms of food. These culinary fictions create a “hyperreal eating” situation where the real act of eating is lacking but a space is created where a multitude of emotions and experiences are expressed considering the culinary practices. Diasporic literature presents a more profound perspective on the subject of food and how it affects the lives of immigrants. This essay will focus on the selected works of Jhumpa Lahiri to analyze the immigration experience from a gendered perspective with an added stress on loneliness, food, and memory. Also, this essay aims to navigate the humanistic aspects of Bengali mothers as exemplified in the diasporic fiction of Lahiri. The humanistic aspects are highlighted to counter the deification of mothers in Indian societies that have situated them on a pedestal, as a consequence of which their corporeal qualities have become obscure and unconceivable to the masses. This “othering” of mothers further reinstates her role as a nurturer, caregiver, and forbearer of sacrificial orders. Ironically, the exaltation of motherly duties often results in serious and far-reaching consequences. It leads to the disregard and outright negligence of emotions and experiences that make a mother human. This dismissal of a mother’s human qualities is often noticed in various instances in Lahiri’s novels where the mother, the producer (of food), is often subjected to traumatic experiences. In conclusion, this essay will chart the complexities of motherhood in Lahiri’s works in terms of spatial, cultural, gastronomical, and gendered aspects.

Binge Eating to Fill the Emptiness: Voices from Young Urban Women in Contemporary China

Jinghan Ma

This paper draws on interviews conducted between 2020 and 2024 with thirteen young urban Chinese women to argue that bingeing on food is a means to resolve loneliness -- or using my interlocutors’ words, to “grab something” after “an abrupt feeling of emptiness”. Situating people’s experience of binge eating in their immediate social worlds and larger social landscape, this paper attends to both how loneliness is socially informed and how binge eating works in coping with loneliness.

All interviewees once dieted in pursuit of a thinner body – the social definition of female beauty in China today. They all achieved success, but then found themselves vulnerable to uncontrollable binge eating and used vomiting and/or exercising to purge. While they feel guilty after bingeing, they also rely on bingeing to resolve the “feeling of emptiness”.

This paper first disentangles how a sense of being out of place emerges between digital encounters on little red book (the most popular social media platform among young urban Chinese youths), and their social encounters in the offline world. While online interactions feature desires, labels, and isolated individuals, offline interactions disappoint participants with pragmatism, messiness, and relational entanglements. With an upset loss of control off the wire, they swallow to connect and chew to conquer.

This paper also unpacks how loneliness emerges from a self-enterprising subjectivity. I use subjectivity in a Foucauldian sense to underscore that one’s relation to oneself is shaped by various governmental regimes in contemporary China. I also extend Foucault’s concept to argue that this self-enterprising subjectivity not only informs a self-self relation but also a self-other relation that entails competition with and thus isolation from others. In binge eating, people transcend the self-enterprising subjectivity by means of “irrational” conducts. Binge eating, I argue, is people’s creative moves beyond the governmental regimes.

Eating alone in old age: An ethnography of the food practices among older adults in La Vera, Spain

Diego Allen-perkins

In the contemporary European context, loneliness has emerged as a central concern on the political agenda. Although most research on loneliness has been conducted from psychological or biomedical perspectives, less is known about the cultural construction and diversity of experiences of a category that is difficult to delimit. From an ethnographic approach, this paper presents the results of a research conducted in the region of La Vera, Spain, focusing on the food practices of older adults who live alone or experience loneliness. Based on 14 interviews conducted in 2023 with individuals who live alone, attend a senior center, or are institutionalized in a nursing home, this work delves into the cultural reality of these spaces. It explores how loneliness can influence food preferences and modes of preparation. Additionally, food practices are analyzed considering variables such as place of residence and socioeconomic status.

“I Don’t Want to Look Miserable”: Solo Dining Culture In the Eyes of Indonesian Young Adults

Cut Fatimatuzzahra

The practice of eating is often associated with spending time with other individuals and forming cherished bonds that extend beyond sustenance where this value could be seen in many cultures around the world, including Indonesia, specifically in Java, where there is a saying ‘mangan ora mangan sing penting kumpul’ (whether you eat or not, the important thing is being together). This proverb shows the strong cultural focus on how society prefers and prioritizes collectivism because it is more meaningful and valuable.

However, at the same time, the cultural focus on communal activities creates a prejudice and stereotypes about loneliness to the point where people who prefer to spend their time alone are frequently referred to as "freaks", "anti-social", "weirdos", and other derogatory names. These labels contribute to the stigma of solitary activities and make it difficult for people to engage in it without the fear of being judged and worry about being scrutinized, particularly solo dining. In this paper, we use a qualitative method to examine this phenomenon by analyzing social media contents and reviewing literature related to the topic. Additionally, we also conduct interviews with young adults aged 18-25 years old or university students to provide in-depth perspectives and personal experiences. By using the concepts of alone and loneliness from cultural perspective and applying Erving Goffman's Dramaturgy theory, we aim to explore how societal perceptions could influence the presentation of self during solo dining experiences.