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Ditchin' the Cafeteria

The culture of eating lunch out for high school students

Studies involving young people and food consumption have focused predominately on the “barriers” to accessing “good” food and its effect on health and/or the poor food choices of young people. Although relevant to young people’s lives, they tend to ignore the broader social, cultural, symbolic, and emotional roles involved in eating practices.

This research explores these broader sociocultural influences on food choice among high school students, and takes an ethnographic and exploratory research approach in order to examine the everyday food encounters of two high school students. A total of 2 participants aged 16 and 17 from separate high schools in the East Toronto area took part in this study. This research provides a unique insight into the ways in which these participants construct and mediate identity through food. Data was collected based on the accounts retrieved through an audio-recorded focus group session with the two participants. Additional data was collected through anonymous survey results, participant observation insights, and a scholarly literature review. The analysis found that three patterns emerge; space/place, social relationships, and social mobility.

Keywords: youth culture, qualitative research, identity, consumption, space and place, social capital

BACKGROUND

Research involving young people and food tends to focus on the “poor” food choices made (Beaulieu & Godin, 2012; Bezerra, Curioni, & Sichieri, 2012; Yeung, 2010; Miles, Cliff, & Burr, 1998; Patrick & Nicklas, 2005). Emphasis on the social and economic barriers to healthy eating can result in neglecting the emotional, social, and symbolic role that food can play in young people’s lives (Bugge & Lavik, 2010; Ioannou, 2009; Lupton, 1994; Nukaga, 2008; Stead, McDermott, Mackintosh, &

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Adamson, 2011; Stok, de Ridder, Adriaanse, & de Wit, 2010; Stok, de Ridder, de Vet, & de Wit, 2014). There are a multitude of complex influences that can affect a person's food choices. Food is not just for banal consumption, it is something that creates meaning for people and groups, projects identity formation, expresses values and beliefs, and represents social affiliation (Cronin, McCarthy, & Collins, 2014; Miles et al., 1998). The activity of choosing what to eat is shaped by the "situation," including social context, food availability, time constraints, and habit (Bell & Pliner, 2003; Hetherington, Anderson, Norton, & Newson, 2006; Jaeger, Bava, Worch, Dawson, & Marshall, 2011).

High school students tend to spend more time with friends away from parental and adult influence (Miles et al., 1998; Wills, Bracket-Milburn, Gregory, & Lawton, 2005). The physical change in location experienced by young people who dine off campus can demonstrate ways in which young people construct their independence (Hall, Coffey, & Williamson, 1999; Ioannou, 2009). Space and place not only aid in fostering social independence, but money and mobility are also factors that influence a young person's ability to experience a particular form of financial independence. High school students are more likely to have more disposable income and physical independence than younger elementary school students, resulting in visiting fast food restaurants more often (Bruening et al., 2014; Miles et al., 1998). Although these aspects of mobility and income influence one's desire and choice of food, it is important to examine even broader constructions that can act as barriers and/or entrances into groups.

Financial costs greatly impact adolescents' decisions on where they eat out and/or if they eat out for lunch at all (Bruening et al., 2014; Wills, Bracket-Milburn, Lawton, & Roberts 2009). Pedrozo's (2011) research on consumption in Rio de Janeiro explores the contentions associated with Brazil's push toward an advanced economic development while the basic needs of the population are not met. This example illustrates not only the under-theorized intersection between youth and globalization (Maira & Soep, 2005), but also how young people are subjected to limitations of all kinds due to cultural expectations created and reinforced through globalization (Pedrozo, 2011). The social pressures that encourage young people to become savvy consumers can be contradictory to their economic realities, which results in groups becoming either oppressed or empowered by the contradictions of consumer society (Pedrozo, 2011; Edwards, 2000). The act of consumerism not only influences group inclusion and exclusion on a global scale, but also affects the inclusion and exclusion of young people's peer groups locally (see Cronin et al., 2014; Pedrozo, 2011).

Friends and peer groups have a strong influence on development and behaviours in adolescents (Bruening et al., 2014; Stok et al., 2014). Research indicates that young people valued social eating with peers, even if they were negatively influenced through this social act of eating (Absolom & Roberts, 2011; Hutchinson

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& Rapee, 2007). Examining peer-group influence can help one to understand and to explore young people's construction of status, social belonging, agency, and identity (Brown, McIlveen, & Strugnell, 2000; Cronin et al., 2014; James, Tingstad, & Kjørholt, 2009; Miles et al., 1998; Stead et al., 2011). This research will move away from the dominant research involving young people, food, and health (Beaulieu & Godin, 2012; Yeung, 2010; Miles et al., 1998; Patrick & Nicklas, 2005), and in so doing will examine the pivotal role that food plays as an identity marker and social tool, and the symbolic dynamics that it holds in young people's lives (Absolom & Roberts, 2011; Delormier, Frohlich, & Potvin, 2009; Lupton, 1994; Neely, Walton, & Stephens, 2014).

PURPOSE

The purpose of this research is to identify the intersecting factors that influence high school students' choices in where they eat off campus during lunch. It also aims to gain insight into the social and symbolic role that lunch plays in the identity construction of students and its effects on social interactions. The two participants, aged 16 and 17 years, greatly informed this research. It is important to note that this research is based on the experiences and knowledge of these two participants and that the findings cannot be applied to every high school student who eats off campus, for "both youth and childhood have had and continue to have different meanings depending on young people's social, cultural and political circumstances" (Wyn & White, 1997). There is a variety of experiences that one can have based on social, cultural, and political circumstances. This research will help to underscore the importance of doing research with young people in order to understand a broader social, cultural, and political perspective.

METHODOLOGY

Participants and recruitment

The recruitment method for this research included a convenience sample and randomized recruitment from food businesses located in walking proximity to a high school. The participants who took part in this project included two high school students that attended different schools, one aged 17 who identified as male (Pat) and one aged 16 who identified as female (Tammy).¹ These participants were chosen on the basis of how often they go off campus (three to five times a week) for lunch during the school lunch period, which made them appropriate participants to take part in this project. Due to the small scale of this research, those who dined at school for lunch were excluded. The second set of participants was a sample of 6 anonymous high school students ranging from 15 to 17 years of age. These participants took part in a randomized survey that was conducted at a food vendor within walking proximity to a high school during the lunch period. The high school location was not released to the two participants in order to maintain anonymity.

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The randomized survey showed the frequency at which the participants dined off campus, which helped in analyzing the survey responses. All participants, including the anonymous participants, were given information of the intentions of the investigator and were told that the research was about their experience and knowledge. Informed voluntary consent forms, as well as information leaflets and discussion about the research, were provided to all participants.

CONTEXT

There was one focus group session conducted with the two participants, which involved a semi-structured interview that was audio recorded. This took place in the staff room where both participants are employed. This space was recommended by Pat and Tammy, which made it a relaxed environment for both participants and for the investigator. The group method was used in order to give space to the possibilities of group analysis (Maira & Soep, 2005). The following example demonstrates a small group analysis about the participants' ideas and attitudes toward leaving their schools' campuses:

Investigator: "Do you think people's behaviours change being on school campus, and then, whenever you leave?"

Pat: "Yes. One hundred percent!"

Tammy: "Well at mine. Everyone just does everything. This morning there was literally a drug deal this morning in front of my locker."

Pat: "I just think like if you're off school property you can just do more."

The two participants demonstrate a personal reflexive analysis when they criticize the other participant's response. This conversation also created a space for confirmation and reassurance of their ideas, which were both shared and challenged. This form of reassurance was also prevalent with the anonymous participants' interactions while completing the survey.

Six anonymous participants were recruited to complete a survey on an iPad. The participants were approached in groups of two, and each pair completed the survey together, resulting in three responses in total. Observational research was conducted in a fast food restaurant within proximity of a high school during lunch hours. The investigator's participant observations helped to compare and contrast common themes found in the discussions with the two participants. This observational method resulted in a contextual understanding of the space and spatial mapping of dining out during lunch hours. The anonymous survey responses were also used to initiate discussion with the two participants and were used to compare and contrast their own ideas with the ones on the survey completed by other high school students. It is important to mention that there was only one focus group session completed. This did not allow for the data to be analyzed by the participants themselves. Additionally,

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it did not allow for the investigator to discuss inconsistencies found in the audio recordings with the participants.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Three themes emerged with regard to the sociocultural significance of going out for lunch within the participants' lives. Initially all the participants stated that the main reason for leaving school at lunch was for food. When the participants were asked what was "important" about going off campus, the survey results and the focus groups shared similar findings of space/place, social relationships, and mobility/income influences. Most apparent was the absent discussion around health and food. This raises the concern about the vast amount of existing research surrounding young people and "poor" choices, which pays little attention to the sociocultural element of food choice. It is important to be critical of previous theoretical frameworks, as they tend to focus primarily on ideas about health. The definition of "health" can change depending on context. The participants in this study did not refer to their health or "poor" choices in food. In examining the social and cultural role of food, one can begin to deconstruct notions of health and "healthy" food.

The importance of dining off campus for the participants ranged from the school cafeteria being too crowded, to the value of getting a break from school, or to being able to spend time with friends. All of these responses suggest that the importance of a lunch break was not necessarily for food, but for a change in space. The decision to leave campus gave these participants the ability to socialize differently with their peers from how the school cafeteria did. These new social spaces were deemed important as they were referred to as offering a "break." This "break" can suggest that there is a particular freedom being offered off campus that allows students to assert themselves differently in this new atmosphere. Pat and one of the anonymous participants both physically opened their arms as if they were about to embrace someone in order to describe the need to "get away" from school. The dramatic physical use of their bodies can be interpreted as their feeling confined within the physical school space. It could be suggested that the change of space is important to these young people in demonstrating their localized and individual citizenship (Hall, Coffey, & Williamson, 1999). For example, two of the anonymous participants said during the time they filled out the survey that on particular days, they go to certain places because of the lunch deals offered there. This social aspect within food practices demonstrates the participants' agency and independence in determining where and when to eat, based on financial and time factors (Delormier, Frohlich, & Potvin, 2009).

Social relationships became the prominent topic of discussion in the focus group. The participants used food practices as a way to manage their social relationships. In order to do so, the participants explained negotiation strategies that were often

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tacit and non-verbal in deciding where to eat out for lunch (Neely et al., 2014). Pat stated, “it just sort of happens” when deciding on where to eat lunch. The negotiating that takes place is not a long process, from what the participants explained; rather, it entailed influence, acceptance, or negation from peers, and what “deals” existed on that day. In deciding where to go, the participants also voiced that some of their peers may lack money. In order to maintain the social relationship, trust was used as a tool (Neely et al., 2014). Only a select few friends in Tammy’s peer groups were said to be trustworthy. She stated, “I only spend money on my one friend Jane, ‘cause she’s worth it.” Tammy’s statement helps to establish group inclusion based on who the participant deems valuable. This statement did change throughout the discussion when Tammy used a different name instead of Jane. This was only caught when reviewing the audio recordings, which does not allow for the assumption to be made that Jane is the only friend for whom Tammy buys lunch. It also should have been further explored as to why she is “worth it.” When she was asked, Tammy said, “all my friends are ungrateful little children.” A second discussion should have been arranged with Tammy in order to determine the qualities that make her other friends not “worth it.” Pat on the other hand did not name any specific friends but referred to his peers as an entire group, and if one needed money he would lend it. With a larger sample of participants, it would be beneficial to compare and contrast the influence that gender can play in managing social relationships within the lunchtime context.

Pat often made it clear throughout the discussion that he is very generous with treating his friends to lunch, demonstrating a form of empathy for his friends. Pat also showed care in a different form with regard to the students who stayed at school for lunch: “then I look at other people and they’re like sitting there and eating a sandwich or something, and I’m like, I dunno know, that sucks.” It is interesting to note that Pat demonstrated empathy as a way to manage his social relationship with his “friends,” but also exhibited empathy in comparing himself to “other” students at school. The ways in which the participants compared themselves to the students that stay in for school speaks to issues of status and belonging to groups within the school environment.

In research of the youth subculture described as emo, Peters (2010) points out that words like emo denote identification and represent who is acceptable and who is not. This gives insight into how social groups are organized according to “membership” and managed by these participants (Stead et al., 2011). The management of groups is also seen in creating distinctive identities amongst “hipster” groups (see Cronin et al., 2012). The “other” group that was not included in this research seemed to hold a lower social status than those who went out for lunch. Pat said, “people that go out tend to think of themselves higher than people that stay in.” The management of social relations by the participants within the lunchtime outing helps in understanding the communicative and symbolic role “lunchtime” can play

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in peer group organization. The sociocultural element of food choice needs to be addressed in research because it can demonstrate cultural expectations and its limitations, how people have different access to certain spaces, and how these spaces can act as markers of difference, maintain and create relationships, and form identity. Due to the limited sample of this study there are weaknesses, and it would be beneficial to analyze behaviours of high school students who tend to stay in for lunch in order to get a richer analysis of peer group organization.

Both participants agreed that those who are seen leaving campus for lunch are assumed by others to have money. A Bourdieusian framework in understanding individuals' status within an organization can help to highlight how the participants ranked going out for lunch as "better" than staying in (Jenkins, 2014). Within the school setting, the participants displayed their "social capital" by taking part in the process of going out for lunch by leaving school campus. It is important to think about who is able to take part in this cultural act of eating out, and the economic barriers that may exclude young people from becoming a part of certain groups. The negative discussions around those who did not purchase, or those who stayed on campus for lunch, symbolize social hierarchies within the school. It is important to reiterate the fact that this conclusion has been reached on the basis of responses from two participants who both enjoy going out for lunch. This research does not include schools whose policy does not allow students to leave campus for lunch, but it would be an interesting topic to explore in future research.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The space in which the focus group was conducted was beneficial with regard to creating a relaxing environment, but there were many interruptions. The participants' co-workers would pass by and chime in about the topic, which could have swayed the participants in terms of what they wanted to discuss. This was a good first meeting place, but in order to achieve a more complete analysis, a one-on-one session along with more focus group sessions in a less distracting space would have been beneficial. It would also be advisable to give the participants an information pamphlet about the research they were to be involved in, as well as information about the research findings. Lastly, a larger sample group with participants from diverse backgrounds would have created a broader framework in understanding the multitude of factors that can create and influence lunchtime culture in high school.

CONCLUSION

This research revolves around a particular time (lunch period), place (away from school), and space (choice in food vendor) that make up lunchtime culture. It sheds light on a range of situational factors that influence the participants' decision in choosing where to eat and demonstrates how eating lunch off school grounds can create a space for students to negotiate boundaries between peer groups outside of

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the school space. It highlights the complexities involved in lunchtime culture including the change in place/space, the negotiations made within peer groups, and the significance that mobility/income plays in group exclusion. While it only sheds light on some of the sociocultural factors that influence the participants' decision to dine out for lunch, this research contributes to the emerging field of understanding young people's social and cultural lives and stresses the relevancy of examining the influence that food plays in social meaning and identity construction.

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¹ Pat and Tammy are the pseudonyms chosen by the participants.