

Food Makes Family: Examining How Food Creates and Reinforces Family Culture

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ABSTRACT

Food is a crucial component of everyday life. Beyond sustenance, food is a force that drives family relationships. This study examined how food creates and reinforces family culture, drawing on Bowen's (1978) Family Systems Theory framework. The theory describes the family unit as an intricate, emotional network where each individual has the ability to impact one another. This study recruited 12 college students raised in the Midwest region of the United States. Results revealed that food facilitates family cohesiveness and involvement, creating a space for intangible support. Moreover, food facilitates the shaping and reinforcing of family behaviors through providing time and space for the communication and practice of family values. This study offers an extension to the current literature by examining the role food plays in family culture formation.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, food has been a means of communicating various messages, such as social class (Woodman, 1989), hierarchy (Julier, 2013), affection, and disdain, among many other types of messages in all cultures and societies (Stajcic, 2013). In modern day society, the fact that food is often used as a means of communication has not changed. Food remains a vital part of society today, as it continues to contribute to cultural practices and social relationships (Lupton, 1994). According to Ma (2015), food has the power to create, facilitate, and share meaning (rituals, beliefs, traditions, etc.) with others, defining relationships between people as well as defining their environment.

The communication process involves encoding messages into symbols and decoding messages through interpreting the messages sent, both verbally or non-verbally (Douglas, 1972; Stajcic, 2013). Food can be categorized as a way to communicate due to the fact that meaning is often shared with others through the usage and consumption of food (Stajcic, 2013). Douglas (1972) claimed that food can be categorized as language, or code, as it can convey messages in social settings. Hence, food is symbolic and can hold various distinct connotations to different individuals (Ma, 2015).

Food can be a driving force of relational development as eating is by nature, social behavior (Hamburg et al, 2014). It can communicate affection (Hamburg et al, 2014; Mandelbaum et al, 2022), power (Ma, 2015; O'Connell and Brannen, 2014; Schmidt et al., 2015; Vaughn et al., 2016), and family culture (Hongyan et al, 2015; Smith et al, 2020). The significance in how food is made, given, or enjoyed, sheds light on creating and building family relationships and, in the process, develops family culture.

In the area of food and family communication, research has explored the ways in which families communicate regarding healthy eating (Carbonneau et al., 2021; Church, 2006; Fiese et al., 2012) and the usage of food in the shaping of children's behavior (Hamburg et al., 2014; Vaughn et al., 2006). However, there is little research focused on the role food plays in the formation and development of family culture and patterns. Food plays an important role in establishing and developing family culture (Moisio et al., 2004) and is an integral part of family socialization and everyday life (Hongyan et al., 2015). Hence, it is important to investigate the use of food in facilitating the formation and development of family culture and identity.

This study aims to further explore messages that are communicated between family members regarding food and how they lead to the development and transmission of family culture. In order to better comprehend the ways in which families communicate with and through the usage of food, past research will be addressed and discussed so that context is provided regarding how food has been used to communicate and facilitate the communication of culture within families. Based on the framework of Bowen's (1978) family systems theory, this paper will examine the concept of food as a means of communicating power and love within the family unit which in turn contributes to the role that food plays into forming family culture.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A deeper understanding of the role of food in shaping family culture will allow families to better establish roles within the family unit while utilizing food to strengthen family relationships and the family as a

whole. In order to better understand how members of a family influence one another with regard to food, the family systems theory will first be explained. Then, the correlation between family meals on family identity will be discussed, followed by an overview of the ways in which food is used to express support and affection. Finally, food will be discussed as a way to communicate and assert power within the family unit.

Family Systems Theory

Connections formed between people are more substantial and intricate than the relationships themselves. A family is defined as a system of relationships, as well as an emotional system in which individuals, interactions, systems, and generations are affected and shaped by each other (Bowen, 1978). Generally, the term system refers to a “set of components that interrelate with one another to form a whole” (Galvin et al., 2007, p. 58). Within a family, there is a collection of elements that interact among themselves to create the societal unit that we know as family.

Families are culturally immersed, and each have their own family identity and culture (Dorrance et al., 2021). Social practices and family norms shape the beliefs and thoughts of people and constantly affect each other. Food consumption habits are shaped by family, friends, and culture (Hamburg et al., 2014). Hence, social construct shapes family communication and vice versa. The family systems theory is focused on the functionality within families, familial context, and the interdependency within families, such as how each member within a family influences the behaviors and beliefs of other family members (Dorrance et al., 2021; Watson, 2012). This includes roles, conflicting needs and demands, power distances, traditions, expectations, and boundaries within one’s respective family.

A family is made up of an interdependent group of individuals who have their own unique identity. Every aspect of human functioning could be involved in the “fusion of selfs” (Bowen, 1987, p. 105), where each family member’s emotions and actions are just a part of an immense family emotional system. The actions and wellbeing of a family member can affect the whole family unit. The family systems theory consists of six interconnected ideas: self-differentiation, the emotional system of the traditional family unit, the cycle of family projection, the process of transmission between generations, sibling position, and the concept of triangles (Bowen, 1978). The theory framework is used in this study to explore ways in which families communicate about food, with a sharp focus on self-differentiation.

Bowen (1978) discusses how family theory is used to explore the ways in which individuals grow up developing various degrees of self-differentiation from their family’s identity. On one hand, members within a family affect one another, be it emotionally or physically; however, there is also the concept of differentiation of self at the opposing end of the fusion of selfs. Differentiation of self is a fundamental idea as it affects the ways in which roles, norms, and the drawing of boundaries are established within families (Erdem & Safi, 2018). While family systems work, individuals within a family interact with other family members while retaining their own sense of identity, which allows for roles within a family to be fulfilled and for lines to be drawn. This can be clearly seen through the time families spend together, such as when family meals and conversations take place.

Family Meals and Family Identity

With the vast and expanding diversity of family structures in modern day society, there is a need to explore how and to what extent family dynamics influence family food consumption, as well as the effect of family meals on family communication and identity (Hongyan et al., 2015). Food messages may indicate the relational closeness and intimacy within a relationship (Ma, 2015). Findings from Hongyan et al. (2015) found that there is a positive correlation between the adherence to family meals and family identity.

Family meals are opportunities for the cultivation of connection within families, which then forms and builds on family identity and culture. Aside from the opportunity to check in, family meals allow for activity planning, the assignment of family roles, and the development of healthy family behavior and relationships (Fiese et al., 2012). Lupton (1994) found that many childhood experiences and memories were focused on family meals, especially dinners. According to Smith et al. (2020), family meals were influenced and shaped by previous experiences and traditions of individuals within the family, which was underlined by the theme ‘just the way I was raised’. The past experiences of growing up with food plays a part in shaping future family identity for the generations to come. An individual’s experience of having a family meal from their upbringing appears to have influenced how their family meals are eaten today (Smith et al., 2020). The concept of transmission between generations (Bowen, 1978) is evident in the way family culture is passed down through the usage of food.

Homemade family meals are avenues in which families create traditions, rituals, share family narratives, as well as communicate the degree of family unity, which ultimately creates and builds on family identity. Homemade food tends to bring up past memories and experiences of consuming the food and of family members who prepared the food, which become family narratives that become a part of a family’s identity

(Moisio et al., 2004). This allows families to identify key characteristics, have a subjective idea of what family means to them, and establish family culture.

Food As Means of Expressing Love and Support in Families

In some households, it is common for parents to proactively express their love and support for their children with and through food in various ways (Al-Mohtadi et al., 2019; Hamburg et al., 2014; Parkin, 2007). According to Parkin (2007), food symbolizes a promise of love and devotion, which suggests that beyond expressing love, food also creates love. In a study conducted by Al-Mohtadi et al. (2019), mothers were mostly found to show affection to their children through preparing food for them, which fell under the category of ‘acts of service’ – a love language. The provision of food within families is a palpable and non-verbal way of communicating love as it demonstrates a sense of attentiveness and care (Mandelbaum et al., 2022).

Family mealtimes foster connection and community within each family (Hamilton and Wilson, 2009). In addition to expressing love, providing and offering food may also serve as “a facilitator for other types of support which can be offered” (Hamburg et al., 2014, p. 5). In other words, food does not only show love, but it shows love through forms of emotional support. Smith et al. (2020) found that when a family gathers for a meal, it sets the atmosphere for daily discourse and significant family discussions. Having food with family allows individuals within a family the opportunity for self-disclosure, which could result in higher levels of family intimacy and emotional support.

Food is often used for the strengthening of social relationships within families and can sometimes be a useful tool in restoring family relationships as well (Heffelfinger, 2016). Hongyan et al. (2015) found that family mealtimes were set apart for family members to connect, stay updated regarding the lives of other family members, and having moments of vulnerability within the family through the discussion of issues faced both inside and outside of the household. This allows families to talk about the issues they have with one another, which allows for reconciliation between family members who are at odds with one another.

Understanding how food is used to express support and love will explain how family members utilize food to create space for family involvement and support. Through exploring the role of food as means of communicating family culture, families could utilize food provision in order to express affection and support to one another.

Food as Means of Control Within Families

Although food is used to communicate love and support within families, it is also used to establish a family culture of reward and punishment. Parenting practices involve using food as means to control and shape the behavior of children (Schmidt et al., 2015; Vaughn et al., 2016). Schmidt et al. (2015) discussed the concept of food as ‘reward or punishment’ and found that most common foods that were given as rewards include desserts and sweets, while common punishments involving food included being made to skip a meal or to consume food that participants did not like. According to O’Connell and Brannen (2014), parents blatantly use food to reward, bribe, or punish their children within their respective households. Similarly, Ma (2015) discussed the way in which food is commonly utilized as a method of reward and discipline within families. Parents would use strongly desirable foods in an effort to mold the behavior of their children (Vaughn et al., 2016). Punishments involving food include withholding food from children, which helps parents control their children’s behavior.

Having a sense of authority as parents is important, but coercive control can be detrimental to a child’s emotional, mental, and physical wellbeing in the long run. Types of coercive control include forced eating, incentives and threats, and using food to regulate unpleasant emotions (Vaughn et al., 2016). Lupton (1994) found that participants remembered with great detail the negative, angry, and resentful emotions and feelings of helplessness that surrounded their experiences with eating while growing up. Coercive control parenting strategies which involve food can lead to children growing up with emotional eating issues, because life at home has shaped them to respond to negative emotions with eating (Hamburg et al., 2014). Excessive eating could lead to health issues in the future.

Families tend to use food as a way of displaying power distances and power struggles, both intentionally and unintentionally (O’Connell & Brannen, 2014; Yau & Christidi, 2018). The provision of food was found to be a way in which parents would assert their power over their children when they live under their roof and when their children no longer live with them (Yau & Christidi, 2018). The provision of food might be a way to express affection, but it can also be a way to establish authority and control. Parents often result to using concealed and subtle food strategies in order to establish authority, which allows them to socialize their children into desirable behavior and establish family culture as well (O’Connell & Brannen, 2014). However, as children grow more independent with age, they tend to provide food for their parents in their effort to assert their autonomy (Yau & Christidi, 2018). Power and control are recurring themes that appear in previous research in regard to food and family.

Although food does symbolize a promise of love and devotion (Parkin, 2007), Heffelfinger (2016) argued that food can be an object of contention and conflict between siblings, resulting in sibling rivalry, as shown in the story of Joseph and his brothers in the Bible. Contrarily to popular belief, it is possible to perceive the affection for food and the provision of food as a source of tension in the dynamics of domestic life, especially more so when children have stepped into adulthood (Yau & Christidi, 2018). By understanding the ways in which power and authority is established, families can better explore ways in which they could influence family culture, while establishing authority in healthy ways.

Research Questions

The goal of this study is to better understand how families utilize food in their communication of family culture. This study specifically aims to explore how families communicate their family culture with and through food within their respective household. Previous research, such as Yau and Christidi (2018), investigated the ways in which food is used to communicate hierarchy and power within families. The majority of studies that were carried out in the area of family communication and food focused on the correlation between women, food, and love (e.g., Al-Mohtadi, 2019; Parkin 2007), shaping children's behavior, and regulating children's emotions (e.g., Hamburg et al., 2014; Vaughn et al., 2016). This brings about the first research question:

RQ 1: How do families communicatively express family culture through food?

Family dinners not only provide family members a chance to check in, but they also provide families the opportunity to organize activities, assign family roles, as well as cultivate family relationships and identity (e.g., Fiese et al., 2012; Hongyan et al., 2015; Lupton, 1994). This highlights aspects of Bowen's (1978) Family Systems Theory, such as interdependency, self-differentiation, the emotional system of the traditional family unit, the cycle of family projection, and the process of transmission between generations. As there has been little research conducted on the topic of the role food plays in the family system, there is a need to further delve into exploring how it does so. Hence, this leads to the following research question:

RQ 2: What role does food play in the family system?

METHOD

The current research utilized a qualitative method through conducting semi-structured interviews to capture and understand participants' experiences and represent their voices. A qualitative approach was more suitable for this study, compared to using a quantitative approach, due to the fact that it focuses on unique communication contexts, such as families, and avoids generalizations (Keyton, 2010). A qualitative approach allowed for the collection of detailed data that involved interpretation (Esterberg, 2002).

Each family has their own patterns of communication (Bowen, 1978) that differ from family to family. Qualitative research falls within the interpretive paradigm, allowing the participants' unique experiences to be interpreted through thematic analysis.

Participants

The participants for this study included 12 college students (four males and eight females) between the ages of 18 and 23, with an average age of 21. Participants consisted of 11 Caucasians and one Asian. Eleven participants were born and raised in the United States while one participant was born in India but was raised in the United States due to family emigration. Participants were recruited based on the researcher's personal network connections. Recruitment was done through word of mouth and text messaging.

Interviews

Data for this study was collected through semi-structured, in-person interviews with college students. Semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to better comprehend the unique experiences of the participants. Each interview lasted between 30 to 60 minutes and were audio recorded upon consent for later transcription. The interview questions allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences about communication, family, and food. They shared their experiences that were related to food, family mealtimes, and family culture. Follow-up questions were posed during the interviews to allow participants to clarify or elaborate on their experiences that has been shared.

Procedure

Upon IRB approval, participants were recruited through the researcher's personal network connections through word of mouth and text messaging. In-person interviews were scheduled and conducted in a library study room. Prior to starting the interviews, each participant reviewed and signed an informed consent form that was provided by the researcher. The researcher then signed the informed consent form and verbally received consent from the participants to audio record the interviews. Audio recordings were through the use of Zoom,

with captions, which provided a downloadable transcript of the interview. Each transcript was reviewed while listening to the recording to make edits and ensure they were transcribed verbatim. All recordings and transcripts were stored in a password protected device after the completion of data analysis. Participants were each given a pseudonym within each transcript, recording, and researcher's notes to keep their identity anonymous and their information confidential.

Analysis

All transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis in consideration of the two research questions. Thematic analysis allowed for better identification, analyzation, and interpretation of the patterns of meaning from the data collected in this study (Braun & Clark, 2002). Through using thematic analysis, the data collected was used to identify common themes that occur in the study data set.

Two copies of each transcript, one for each research question, were printed for analysis and coding. Common utterances and themes were identified and used as codes for both research questions. One research question at a time, each coding unit was cut from the interview transcripts and taped to a labelled notecard. The notecards were sorted based on its correlation to the research questions. Similar codes were grouped together and identified as a common theme. The process of identifying common themes occurred until six common, overarching themes were identified, along with subthemes when warranted. Each theme and sub-theme was named and defined in a way that communicated the essence of the themes in relation to each research question (Braun & Clark, 2006).

RESULTS

Three themes for each research question emerged. Each theme for RQ1 included two subthemes and one theme for RQ2 included three subthemes. A detailed description of each theme is provided below.

RQ 1: How do families communicatively express various family cultures through food?

As food is such a crucial part of family life (Hongyan et al., 2015; Stajcic, 2013; Woodman, 1989), the objective of RQ1 was to examine how families make decisions in relation to food to communicate, reinforce, and cultivate family culture. Three themes main themes were "It's Dinner Time!", Don't Cross the Line, and Gratitude. The subthemes dig deeper into the purpose of each main theme.

"It's Dinner Time!"

This theme encapsulates the role food plays in family socialization during family mealtimes, especially of children within a family unit. Family mealtimes, particularly dinners, were seen as a time for relational maintenance within the family and establishing family norms. Dinner was the only time of the day where most, if not all, family members within a family unit could gather for a time of connection over food. Food was seen as a facilitator of conversation during family mealtimes, which allowed for socialization at the dinner table. Two subthemes that further explain this theme are Upkeeping Family and Routines, Rituals, and Repetition.

Upkeeping Family. Participants shared that dinner was the only consistent time all family members were usually home to share a meal together, as the family tends to be dispersed throughout the rest of the day. This allowed participants and their respective family members to check in with each other. Riley explained:

[dinner] was a place of conversation and was where we would catch up with our day and we would have busy schedules sometimes so, if we're all busy and doing something, you would know that dinner might be the only time we have to have good conversation with each other.

Participants emphasized the importance of family time as a means of connection and the ways in which food symbolized its significance. A 'priority' was a word that participants commonly used when asked to describe family mealtimes. Vulnerability was welcomed and encouraged by parents at the dinner table, which allowed for relational maintenance and development during family mealtimes. Brielle explained that she saw family culture being communicated on a smaller note in her household through the prioritization of eating together and "relationship building through food."

An initial utterance during family mealtimes was the phrase "How's your day?" This question was posed by authority figures, which signaled the opening up of space for conversation within the family. This gave participants and their siblings an avenue to share what was going on in their lives, allowing for relational maintenance. Crystal stated: "... this is just a norm. It could go any one of those ways. It's such a normal thing to talk about food that it could, just like asking, "How's your day?", you know? It can go any number of ways."

To participants, dinner was viewed as a time set apart for family bonding and cohesiveness due to the complexity of the meal as well. Reese mentioned that family dinners tend to take more time and effort to make. Hence, his family tends to feel obliged to stay at the table and have meaningful conversations for a longer period of time during family dinners. The time spent at family meals allow for family patterns to be established.

Routines, Rituals, and Repetition. Food facilitates establishment and reinforcement of family roles during family mealtimes. Parents were mainly seen as authority figures in the participants' families. The family member who asked, "How was your day?" were observed to have the role of 'Initiator' during family meals. Often times, it would be participants' mothers who started off the family mealtimes conversations and does most of the talking, evidenced by Kris' quote:

She's pretty much the Initiator. I would say, my mom is the Initiator in asking like new questions like how can we continue to keep this conversation running? And my dad's definitely more the facilitator as in asking details and gaining understanding, so that, like everyone can kinda understand what's going on.

Mothers were often described as having the role of initiating conversation at the dinner table, while fathers tend to take on the role of facilitating family mealtime conversations. However, both roles were described as sometimes interchangeable between both parents. Participants' parents were seen as leaders of the conversation, while participants and their siblings reinforced those roles of leadership within the family by answering the questions and elaborating on their answers. Brielle states: "If we have stuff we want to like, talk about, we can talk about it, I guess, but my parents are usually the ones who like lead the conversations. And usually, my mom more than my dad."

Reese elaborates on similar experiences with conversation he has had during family mealtimes:

My mom would start off deep because she just had the most to say, whereas my brother, my dad, and I are more closed in like, not that we didn't want to talk, we just didn't feel the need to talk about everything during our day. Where my mom wanted to talk about everything that happened that day. So, she would, and my brother and I would kind of make fun of her. And then my dad would yell at us for making fun of her. So, that's how the conversation went.

Similarly, Wilson states:

Both my mom and dad kind of had equal roles in creating and encouraging conversation. Both of them would ask questions or facilitate conversation there. So, mainly it was them asking us question and us responding until we got to the point of like chatting about something.

Parents would start and facilitate conversations over food, directing conversations and establishing family norms which also allows for the communication and reinforcement of boundaries and expectations.

Don't Cross the Line

The theme Don't Cross the Line represents boundary setting and expectations in the family, as found at family dinners and through discussions of food. This theme was evident throughout all participants' experiences. All participants reported the use of boundary setting by authority figures during family mealtimes and with food, especially while growing up. Two subthemes identified include Head Honcho and Family Code. These subthemes further explain the role food plays in control and boundary setting within families.

Head Honcho. Food was seen as means of control within the family. In terms of food, Rhys described her mother's role as "Head Honcho in the kitchen" which was later explained as 'chief.' Being the person providing the meals, parents prepared meals that were balanced. Each participant with the exception of one, mentioned that a typical family meal consisted of having a carbohydrate such as potatoes, a meat, as well as a vegetable side. Parents were reported to reinforce the importance of a balanced meal through the preparation of food during family mealtimes. The word 'control' was often used in association with participants' mothers when it came to the process of preparing and serving meals. Riley stated: "I think my mom, she really likes control, and her biggest thing is she hates when her kitchen is messy, and like if things are not cleaned up exactly her way, she gets super super upset."

Another participant described her mother in this way: "And my mom was very like strict authoritarian type. Her love language was spoken through food, so a stuffed belly was enough for her to say, I love you." Love was expressed through the control of food intake in participants' families, which participants both appreciated yet felt frustrated with at times. Some reported that now they, too, use food to express love.

Restrictions and incentives in relation to food was reported as a way to control participants' behavior as children. For example, participants were not allowed to have dessert if they did not finish the healthy parts of their meal or a healthy amount of food on their plates, as evidenced by Homer's statement:

It's usually unless you finish your unless you finish your meal, you can't have the sweet thing that we have for you. But I don't think it was often used as a punishment for anything other than you have to eat all of your food or you have to eat all of your vegetables. Not necessarily all of your food sort of thing.

Vegetables were categorized as healthy parts of a meal. Participants were told that they were not allowed to have dessert if they didn't finish their vegetables. As a result, they felt upset about not being able to have dessert as a child. However, as they grew older, they were grateful that those restrictions with dessert were

put into place by their parents. Dessert and snacks were often described as a reward or punishment by participants, especially when they were younger. Sometimes, eating in would also be seen as punishment. Reese described his experience below:

We never had meals taken away from us, but we would lose snacking privileges if we were bad. I'd say that's the big one. Or like going out to eat, or something. Like if we wanted to go out to eat, which we don't do a lot, but when we lived in Waukesha we did more often because it's right down the road. But if we were bad, okay, now, we're not gonna go into KFC. We're just going to have leftovers.

Using food as an incentive or punishment usually resulted in the adjustment of participants' behavior, especially when they were younger. Participants reported a change in their behavior after experienced the withholding of food that was desired as a child. Expectations and boundaries are discussed further in the following subtheme.

Family Code. Having meals together as a family allowed for family rules and expectations to be established. Participants used the words "expected" and "know what's appropriate" when it came to conversations during family mealtimes. Family mealtimes allowed them to learn what topics were "appropriate" to be brought up at the dinner table as well as what language was "appropriate".

Complaining was a common occurrence at the dinner table. Often times, dinner happened right after family members had just reached home and so it was reported to be a time where parents would vent about happenings at work. Of all 12 participants, 11 were Western participants while one was Asian. All Western participants reported that no topics were ever off the table; however, Crystal, a participant with Indian heritage, mentioned that dating and talk in relation to independence and autonomy were considered "taboo" and were not talked about at family meals. Although this is the experience of one Asian participant, it is important to note that there are dimensions of cultural variability when it comes to family.

Family cultures of 'respect' and 'common courtesy' was commonly communicated through the usage of food between parents and children during family meals. Participants emphasized manners and respect allowed for family mealtimes and eating. This included respect towards the people who provided and made the food while also respecting the food itself, no matter where it came from, how it tasted, or what it consisted of. Family mealtimes allowed participants to learn to recognize authority. Regarding manners, Wilson stated: "At the dinner table, specifically manners were expected. And so, lots of pleases and thank you, especially when it comes to food or asking for something."

Manners included offering compliments for the food and saying please and thank you. Rhys explains the way in which common courtesy was "interjected into whatever conversation" her family was having by her mother, noting "she'd make sure that everyone like got seconds before someone takes third, or whatever, it's just stuff like that. So like making sure that everyone's gotten equal. So sometimes, that was part of the conversation."

Participants brought up health as an expectation that was highly valued by family. While growing up, they recalled being expected to finish their food and to eat healthy. This involved learning to make healthier food choices through having family meals. Participants reported that they were taught to portion their food, finish their vegetables, or to finish their meal in general, which established an expectation when it comes to nourishing their bodies. Wilson describes his family's expectations when it came to eating: "We are always encouraged, and pretty much expected to finish the food on our plate if we took it. And we're always expected to eat the healthier part of the meal as well. Not just the part that we liked best."

Food allowed for the facilitation of setting expectations and rules during family mealtime as it allowed families to spend time communicating. This allowed for adjusting behaviors based on verbal and non-verbal feedback. While boundary setting is essential for family cohesiveness, gratitude also plays a significant role in enhancing family cohesiveness. The following theme will investigate the role food plays in cultivating and reinforcing family values of gratitude.

Gratitude

The theme of gratitude was commonly mentioned by all participants when it came to family mealtimes. This theme described the way in which food and family mealtimes set up the premise to communicate the importance of gratitude towards God and others who made the meal possible. This cultivated a strong family culture of gratitude within the participants' families. The subthemes identified within this overarching theme were labelled Thank You God and Someone Had to Provide.

Thank You God. Most participants spoke about prayer when questioned about their family mealtimes. Often times, prayer signified the beginning of the family mealtime. Kris stated: "We always prayed before meals. Before every meal we prayed. So even now I still pray before meals and respect Jesus, and the food that He provides to nourish our bodies."

Wilson too, mentioned: “We'd all sit down together at the same time. We would pray for the food, and then pass the food around.” This was also evidenced in Cheryl’s statement: “We’ll usually we pray together before we eat, and something recently we started, we'll do like prayer requests before we pray.”

Parents instilled a sense of gratitude towards God through initiating and encouraging prayer at family meals. Prayer during family mealtimes was also used to communicate care and gratitude towards others within the family.

Since prayer at the dinner table was more so prayers of gratitude, they were still taken seriously, but were usually more light-hearted. Rhys mentioned that she and her siblings would sing their table prayers which was taught at Lutheran school. This was encouraged by her parents. In regard to prayer and her family mealtimes, Rhys stated:

As we were getting older, we would sometimes add in, like we would sing our table prayer, and then they would add stuff afterwards and say like a more serious prayer afterwards. But yeah, growing up it just, like it kept, prayer is fun. And we still treated them as prayers, we didn’t just treat them as songs. A prayer of gratitude was seen as important and necessary to start off family mealtimes in order to recognise the provision that allowed for meals to be had.

Someone Had to Provide. Money, time, and effort goes into making meals. Hence, having a meal meant that someone put in the labour to provide the food. Often times, it is parents who provide the meal in one way, shape or form. Food was reported to facilitate the giving of gratitude during family mealtimes through compliments, a recognition of the source of the meal. There was an emphasis on being grateful for the people who provided the food on their table and for the food itself.

Family history and narratives were mentioned as reasons for the emphasis on gratitude within participants’ families. Kris mentioned that he had a grandmother who grew up in the Great Depression which taught the family to be grateful for everything that they were provided with, including food. In each interview, all 12 participants mentioned that they had parents or grandparents that emigrated to the US without much, which contributed to the emphasis on thankfulness for the food they can have today.

Food was seen as a facilitator of communication within families due to the time it provided families to spend together. This allowed for families to communicate family culture through food provision and food-related conversations where boundaries were set and gratitude was stressed in various ways. The following research question will explore the ways in which the nourishment of food goes beyond the body and seeps into family relationships.

RQ2: What role does food play in the family system?

Three overarching themes emerged from this research question: *Who Am I?*, *Pass It Down!*, and *Well, It Depends On...* Each of these themes and their subthemes allow for a deeper understanding of how food affects the cohesiveness of the system called family.

Who Am I?

This theme represents how an understanding of cultural heritage is facilitated within families through food and family mealtimes. As participants pointed out, food was seen as a means of sustenance in their families. However, participants also explained that the way they consume food and type of food they consume today dates back to their cultural heritage and family history. The cultural significance of food within each participant’s family was passed down through generations through family narratives during family mealtimes.

Family narratives regarding the food that was eaten at family meals were a way participants learned about their respective family identity, patterns, and cultural heritage. Family narratives refer to experiences and stories that are shared within families in order to create and pass down heritage and identity (Maurya, 2016). Some participants described their typical family meals as a farmer’s diet as they explained their family’s history, most of which consisted of having grandparents who were farmers and emigrated to the US without much in their pockets.

Some participants used specific types of food to describe their family, particularly “potatoes” and “meat.” Reese, whose grandmother and mother grew up on a farm, described his mother’s side of the family as a “very meat, potatoes, eggs” type of family. Reese explained, “I think that was very much a part of their culture as farmers” which bled into his family’s culture today.”

Family narratives about childhood experiences were often brought up because of specific food that were available in the household or during family mealtimes. Rhys mentioned that her dad, who “grew up as a farm kid,” would look at skim milk, which is the only milk available in their household, and start sharing his experiences with the family of drinking fresh whole milk. As a result, her family received insight into her father’s family culture and background.

Participants also reported that traditional food available at family gatherings during the holidays allowed for the exchange and sharing of family narratives with extended family. This provided family members a shared understanding of their family roots. Although food was not the reason family gatherings happened, it was reported to have facilitated conversation and was often a reminder of participants' cultural heritage. The significance of family narratives in sharing cultural heritage exhibits the role food plays in multigenerational transmission within families which brings about the following theme.

Pass It Down!

The theme *Pass It Down* refers to the concept of multigenerational transmission within families. This involves the ways in which family patterns, relationships, and roles are passed down from parents to their children through socializing and passing on information. Transmission between generations include the projection of emotions and beliefs from parents onto their children which is a continuous cycle. Subthemes include *Got It from My Parents*, *Family Recipes*, and *I Think About It Sometimes*.

Got It from My Parents. Since the family is an intricate system of subsystems, one family member can affect other relationships within the family unit. Participants reported that food habits and eating behavior were passed down in their family from their parents. Family narratives were seen as ways parents would explain the reasoning behind their eating habits and behavior at family mealtimes. There were certain habits and behavior that they have today which were picked up from their parents during family mealtimes. When questioned regarding topics commonly discussed at the family meals, Homer recalled:

... hearing about my father's family growing up and how I remember comments that were made plenty enough of the time where he's like, he eats fast and he's like, oh, yeah, when I was a kid I had four brothers and you had to eat fast or you wouldn't get any food.

Homer later mentioned that:

I think I eat fast, I don't know if I just pick it up from my dad. Or if I hear about it but that's why I think about it sometimes. I'm like oh I eat fast, my dad eats fast, do I get it from my dad?

Participants explained that their family was either adventurous or not with their food, which stemmed from their parents' eating behavior. They reported that their parents' eating behavior and preferences affected the family's eating behaviors and habits as a whole. When asked about family meals, participants brought up their parents' eating behavior before delving into the eating behavior of the rest of the family.

Growing up around family meals, participants' eating habits were also cultivated through family mealtimes. They described their family as either picky eaters or exploratory eaters. A participant mentioned that one parent was a picky eater while another was not but had to accommodate to that. This impacted the food provided during family meals and throughout the household. As a result, the family was taught not to be too adventurous with their food choices. Food and family behavior are very intertwined. Hence, it is no surprise that family recipes also play a big role in transmitting and reinforcing behaviors and traditions through generations.

Family Recipes. Recipes are not just about sustenance, but carry stories of family roots, experiences, and identity. Often, family recipes are passed down from generation to generation which each participant pointed out. Each reference to a family recipe shared by participants was accompanied by a short narrative of who would make the food, where it was made, and when it was usually made. All participants mentioned that recipes were passed down within their respective families, usually by their grandmothers to their mothers. They also expressed the expectation that they will receive family recipes from their mothers when they have their own families.

Family recipes were seen as an inheritance for female family members holding maternal roles within each family. Cheryl spoke about her mom's chocolate chip cookie recipe: "... I like to think it's kind of like the secret recipe that I will get someday."

A male participant mentioned that his wife would be given his grandmother's recipe for cheesy potatoes when he is married in the future. Recipes were reported to be changed and modified as they are passed on from generation to generation in participants' families. They would also remind participants of particular family members from whom the recipes came from. Likewise, certain utterances associated with food are also passed down from generation to generation within families, becoming a part of family culture and behavior.

I Think About It Sometimes. Utterances play an important role in shaping family behavior and identity. Participants reported that they remembered specific phrases that their parents would repeat during family mealtimes. Most phrases that were mentioned were health-related or encouraged eating. Like family recipes, utterances were reported to be passed down through generations within families. Utterances that were transmitted to participants included "Clogs your arteries," "It's good for you," and "Can't hate it til you try it." Participants reported that these phrases were said often enough during family mealtimes that they think about

these utterances today and find themselves repeating them when going about their day. This was reported to affect participants' behavior when it came to eating.

I'm Depending on You

Within a family unit, there is a mutual dependency and reliance between all family members. This theme encompasses the aspect of interdependency that is found within the family system. In relation to food and family mealtimes, participants reported that their actions and behavior were affected by other individuals within the family unit.

All participants reported that their parents held the role of cooking and providing for the family when they were kids. When they were younger, participants would help out with menial tasks in the kitchen such as washing vegetables or washing the dishes. Participants' roles in the kitchen and at the dinner table were determined by their parents. As they grew older, they were given more responsibilities and a bigger role in the cooking process by their parents when it came to preparing food for the family. Participants reported that they now occasionally take over the role of cooking for the family during family mealtimes when they are home during breaks. This happened more so when their parents are occupied with work or other chores.

All 12 participants described their families as a traditional nuclear family consisting of a father, a mother, and children. Out of 12 participants, 11 participants described their mom as the one who cooks for the family most. One participant mentioned that in their family, it is a norm for their dad to be the one preparing meals for the family. Most participants mentioned that their mom tend to do most of the indoor cooking while their dads would do the outdoor cooking such as grilling. Brielle stated:

She works from home and so, she is able to cook during the day. She enjoys doing it. And in our house, we have more traditional roles than some. My mom will do a lot of the stuff in my house, and my dad will do a lot of the stuff outside. My mom helps outside too, but at any time there's something to be grilled it would be my dad's job.

Availability was seen as a factor that determined who would prepare family meals and the type of food that was prepared. All participants pointed out that the person who usually does the cooking in the family was the one who enjoys cooking and had the most time on their hands. Participants mentioned that when they were younger, whichever parent was least busy would handle preparing food for the family. As they have grown up, most participants shared that they sometimes take on the role of cooking because the parent who usually took on that role told them to prepare dinner or start preparing the meal until they are able to come and take over.

Reese shared his experience with cooking family meals:

I'd cook for everyone starting high school when they felt comfortable with me cooking. Mainly, I would start the grill and start the grilling. Sometimes I'd finish it, sometimes when Dad would get back before the meat was actually cooked and he'd finish it. Then I'd cook pasta, which is super easy, or start the oven to put a casserole in, or something like that.

Kris, another participant, also explained that his family members would "cover" for each other when there was a lack of availability:

... if somebody has to go, say, someone's rushed and everyone else is not, we cover for that person because we know that they would do the same for us. Say, you have to go on a date, or you have an interview it's hey, here's a meal. Eat it up and get out of here, and I'll clean it up for you.

Roles held within families were reported to change upon circumstance. Interdependence was seen through the reliance on family members to carry out family responsibilities.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to explore the role food plays within the family system, specifically in creating and reinforcing family culture. The study investigated the ways in which food facilitates the communication of family culture within the family unit as well as the role food plays in the family system. Aspects of Bowen's (1978) Family Systems Theory can be identified within the themes of this study. The themes highlight the way food facilitates family communication and the way families function as an emotional network. Food was reported by participants to have had an impact on their behavior today. Findings from this study build upon previous literature regarding food and family communication.

A vast majority of participants' experiences and recollections with food and family were centered around family mealtime. This aligns with Lupton's (1994) study, in which childhood experiences and memories were focused on family meals, especially dinners. Findings from the current study revealed that dinner is a time set apart for family mealtimes due to common availability and was therefore made a "priority." During the day, individual members within families were often occupied with work, chores, school, or activities. These findings provide good reasoning for dinner to be a family affair which as a result, fulfilled families' relational needs. The current study found that having family dinners was a family norm established by parents within families through which family cultures were created.

Results from this study indicate that families value having the routine of family mealtimes because it allowed family members to “catch up,” “be together,” and have “relationship building through food,” which was deemed beneficial for the family as a whole. These findings align with Smith et al.’s (2020) study, which found that having a family meal was not just time for nourishment for family members, but was also seen as a crucial element of family socialization that promotes family involvement. Similarly, the current study suggests that the primary purpose of family mealtimes was to maintain relationships within the family unit as food and meals could always be eaten alone. Findings reiterate that ‘togetherness’ was found to be a concept highly prioritized by families, which Bowen (1978) states, come from the universal need for approval, emotional intimacy, and love. However, unlike in Smith et al.’s (2020) study, families stressed on the concept of health and nourishment with daily food intake but especially communicated its importance during family mealtimes. Interestingly, participants also brought up that the complexity of the food offered at family dinners causes family members to feel an obligation towards staying at the dinner table longer. This finding brings forth the suggestion that food that require more time and effort to prepare serves as facet that creates more time for families to be together.

Additionally, this study found that food facilitates the establishment and socialization of family norms. Parents would start off and lead family mealtime conversations while children would reply. An interesting finding that emerged from this study was that mothers tend to initiate family conversations while fathers would hold the role of facilitating the conversation. Furthermore, the study found that mothers would handle more of the indoor cooking while fathers would always be the ones working on outdoor cooking. Results from the study indicated that male children would take over or help out with outdoor cooking whereas female children tend to help out with indoor cooking. These finding suggests that gender is a factor that plays into the roles that family members take up or exchange within the family.

Family culture was communicated within families through boundary setting and expectations. Conversational appropriateness was communicated through socialization at family mealtimes. Results from this study found that food allowed parents to facilitate family mealtime conversations while children adjust their behavior based on parents’ feedback. The complexity of the food offered at the dinner table also gave families the time to socialize and, in the process, family members communicate boundaries and expectations regarding mealtimes conversations.

Having food together facilitated and communicated a culture of vulnerability within families. An interesting finding was that of all 12 participants, 11 participants of Western heritage claimed that no topic was ever off the tables. One participant, of Indian heritage, mentioned that “taboo” topics such as independence and dating were off the table at family meals growing up. These findings suggest that there are dimensions of cultural variability at play within various families. Interestingly, food provision was initially observed to be a physical means of support within families, but in hindsight, was revealed to facilitate emotional support within families as well. This builds upon Mandelbaum et al.’s (2022) study, which showed that the provision of tangible support from social groups can result in emotional social support. Food provision allowed for check-ins within families, which opened up conversation and space for family members to share about what was going on in their lives which also included venting about their day. Food can play the role of facilitation through creating an environment where support could be provided in different ways (Hamburg et al., 2014).

The current study found that gratitude was a prominent value that families reinforce when eating together. Family culture of gratitude was communicated through the establishment of prayers before meals. Prayer was a way practicing Christian families communicated gratitude towards God and each other, but an interesting pattern also emerged. Families would always pray before they ate and participants mentioned the meal did not start until a prayer was said. The results of this study show that mealtime prayers revolve around gratitude and signifies the beginning of meals within Christian households, placing a priority on being grateful. To add, findings indicate that food allowed parents to teach children to be grateful for the people and labour put into making their meals possible and having food to consume at all.

Through this study, food was found to play a role in facilitating the understanding of cultural heritage within families. This finding indicates that understanding cultural heritage provides family contexts for the values, beliefs, and patterns they hold today. Ultimately, food affects daily discourse and everyday actions that impact relationships within the family and the family as a whole. Findings show that family narratives were commonly used to explain or emphasize cultural heritage, family history, family habits, as well as family values. Having traditional food with family was also found to have open up conversation and remind families of their cultural heritage.

Findings from this study found that parents project levels of their emotions, habits, and behavior when eating with family. Traditions and values were passed down as family culture as well. This was identified as the concept of multigenerational transmission discussed in Bowen’s (1978) Family Systems Theory. While Bowen (1978) discussed the transmission between generations in relation to the transmission of degrees of immaturity and mental health disorders from parents to children, this current study explored the concept of multigenerational transmissions in relation to family culture. Findings showed that recipes are often passed down from maternal figures to their children - often female. Food habits and behavior were passed down from

parents to children as well. Eating tendencies, such as being picky or exploratory eaters and eating fast, were identified as being picked up by children from parents through family narratives or mimicry which family mealtimes allowed plenty of time for. This study suggests that eating tendencies are picked up by children as a result of mimicry among family.

In the Family Systems Theory, Bowen (1978) described family relationships as a large emotional system of emotional subsystems where each person has the ability to affect another within the family unit. Results from the current study support his claim as findings suggest that food creates the atmosphere for families to provide and fulfil both physical and emotional needs. Hence, food create a space for family interdependence to be displayed. Family mealtimes was found to be a place where issues would be brought up and relational currencies were exchanged. Food itself was found to be a relational currency but so was time together, verbal statements, and service that food allowed the exchange of. Thus, emotional dependency was facilitated through food in families. It was not surprising that findings revealed that how a parent felt about their day would determine the environment of the family meal or the type of food the family would be having. Findings from this study show that the emotions of one family member can affect the behavior of other members of the family, if not the whole family.

Utterances were found to be a way in which beliefs and values were commonly transmitted from parents to children when dining together. Findings show that utterances repeated at family meals had a common goal of encouraging healthy eating or introducing variety to children's diet. As children grow up, they find themselves thinking about the phrases their parents would repeatedly say to them during meals. The results of the current study suggest that utterances transmitted from parents to children within the family unit play a role in shaping children behavior as they grow up. It appears that some utterances were said so often that children carry it with them and repeat those utterances themselves. This indicates that utterances can be carried down through generations that become a part of family culture as it affect behavioral outcomes.

Aside from emotional dependency within families, an interesting finding from the current study revealed that each person's role in the family unit was dependent on each other. Parents would cook while children would help out when they were younger. Children have a dependence on food provision, which gives parents the role of cooking. Results from this study indicate that with age, children receive a bigger role in food provision. As children grow older, they would sometimes take over the cooking process for family meals or take over until parents are able to resume the role of cooking. This study suggests that there is an interdependency with food provision within families as family roles can be exchanged when needed within families in order to put food on the table. Each person's behavior within the family influences the behavior of other individuals within the family unit.

An intriguing pattern that emerged from this study was that gender appeared to be associated with family food task. Food prepared indoors were found to be commonly prepared by mothers who were sometimes helped by their children. Fathers would handle outdoor cooking in which male children would help out. These seem to be strong societal norms that have infiltrated family culture and the positions family members hold and come to hold within families.

Limitations

Data collection for this study was completed within two weeks. As a result, only 12 participants were interviewed. The time constraint did not allow for more participants to take part in the study affecting the diversity of the participant pool. It would have been ideal for a more varied demography.

Another limitation that surfaced was that some participants would claim that they did not know how to answer some questions in the interviews but then answer them within answers towards other questions. Most participants also expounded quite a bit on their answers, which confused the researcher at times. Hence, the researcher had to ask a lot of clarifying and leading questions in order to come to a direct answer. Some participants also seemed scared to answer some questions due to the fear of giving the 'wrong' answer. While this data analysis is thorough, the responses from participants required extra work on the part of the research in order to make logical connections while honouring their voices.

Conclusion

This study investigated the ways in which families use food to communicate family culture as well as the role food plays in families. Findings from this study revealed that food facilitates the development of family culture and positively impacts family cohesiveness. Results from this study also strongly exhibited the concepts of multigenerational transmission and the family as an emotional system within Bowen's (1978) Family Systems Theory in relation to food consumption and behavior within families. Food creates a space and time for families to get together where family culture is communicated, taught, and practiced by all members within a family unit. This study proved that it is beneficial that families practice eating together on a regular basis as it produces favourable results.

Findings from this study offered significant and fresh insight into the ways food facilitates the establishment and reinforcement of family culture. Each person's behavior within a family influences the behaviors of other individuals within the family unit. Although each family is unique and dynamic, food holds similar and important roles within each family system allowing for family identity and patterns to form and change over time, or stay the same. When food is utilized well within households, families can build up a healthy and strong family unit through the communication of family culture that food particularly allows.

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