‘If you see me cooking you’ll see clearly I am not from here’: food and migration in the context of transnationalism

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Abstract

Food is a social and cultural capital, a symbolic medium through which we express our identity and group membership. Therefore, food culture and habits play a significant role in the processes of migration and acculturation, especially from the transnational perspective. This study, in which six European high-skilled migrants were interviewed in depth, explores how migrants experience acculturation in their diets and how they negotiate the food culture of receiving country, the United Kingdom. The results reveal that in the light of transnational theory, food enables newcomers to stretch their culture over time and space and helps them to accommodate to the new environment. This means participants retain most of their habits while adapting and acquiring new ones, alongside the neophobic and neophilic continuum. Besides, the study also raised a question for further research of migration, belonging and ‘European identity’, since majority of participants did not identify themselves with the concept of migrant.
Introduction

Food is absolutely central to our sense of identity as we are constructed biologically, psychologically and socially by the food we literally incorporate into our bodies. ‘Tell me what you eat and I’ll tell you what you are,’ wrote famously Anthelme Brillat-Savarin in 1825 in his Physiology of Taste (Brillant-Savarin, 2011 [1949]: 15). The way we feed ourselves derives from and determines social membership: it communicates our identity (Montari, 2006). Meal divides and unites, it defines who belongs and who does not. Similarly to language, food is the other pillar of construction of a home, as Kershen (2004: 266) suggests. On the other hand according to Montari (2006: 133) food can serve as a mediator between different cultures, rather than a spoken language. Along the line of this argument, the aim of this study was to explore how migrants express their cultural identity through diet, how they retain their dietary cultural identity and how they negotiate the diet of the host country. Through a series of interviews with migrants I intended to gain an insight into their perception and understanding of their food culture and diet and their confrontation with the diet of the host country, the UK, since it often creates conflicting identities: “(…) just because I eat English food, it doesn’t mean that I am English” being the view of one young Asian woman (Kershen, 2004: 265).

This study focused on the population of migrant university staff and their spouses. Research usually focuses on immigration from the low-income to the high-income countries and food is not an exception (see for example Burns, 2004; Grieshop 2006, Mountz and Wright, 1996; Codesal, 2008). Many projects are hence dedicated to studying ‘down’ rather than ‘up’ (Chalfen, 2008). Although one of the reasons of studying ‘down’ is giving a voice and empowering marginalized communities, simultaneously it can lead to ‘othering’ and exploitation. There is the premise that the less powerful groups in the society are less likely to say ‘no’ to the researcher in contrast to the more powerful groups which have the power to reject the researcher. Therefore although Coventry has generally very lively, multicultural communities of migrants, because of a variety of ethical (vulnerability) and practical (the level of English) reasons, a group of migrant university staff was more preferable. They are professional, high-skilled migrants who can be omitted in the focus of the general research of food and immigration, maybe because they belong to a group which is more like ‘us’ (academics, middle or upper class), their views may be ‘obvious’ and therefore ‘less interesting’ (Chalfen, 2008).

Literature Review

Although the past 20 years have been widely described as the age of migration (see for example King et al, 2010), compared to a century ago when 2.5 – 3.5 % of population migrated, the levels have not actually risen, only mostly the direction has changed (de Haas, 2005: 1270). It was François Crépeau,
Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants who addressed in October 2011 UN General Assembly with a simple message: we are all migrants now. There is a variety of migration frameworks and definitions, however, all of them recognize the most essential aspect: the spatial element. It is about geographic distance, movement and residence in different places (King et al, 2010). It is hard to establish how long the person has to be a ‘resident’ to be regarded as a migrant and King et al argue that there is no universally accepted answer but the administrative threshold is usually a year. The boundaries between a ‘visit’, ‘residency’, ‘migrancy’ or ‘mobility’ are even more blurred in terms of the intra-migration in the European Union. As Mahroum (2001: 27) reminds us, in the EU there are no upfront political restrictions preventing locals to go abroad. And highly-skilled migration in particular (defined by attaining tertiary education), which includes also university staff, their spouses and academics in general, is becoming an inseparable element of economic development.

Original theories of migration (for review see for example Kahanec et al, 2010) stress the cost-effectiveness choice framework, including several aspects such as language ties, distance, income, cost of living, unemployment rate or social and psychological costs (Wolf, 2006). Sjastaad (1962: 86) in particular refers to the psychological costs as to ‘being far from family and friends […] and a preference for familiar versus strange surroundings’. This line of argument is strongly present in the modern theory of migration - transnationalism - which introduces the idea that migrants are living ‘dual lives’ by actively participating in communities in their home countries as well as in the community of their current residence (Vertovec, 2007). There is the tendency for migrants residing in new places, separated and with alternated identity, to reduce the ‘foreignness’ by attempting ‘to live in a familiar way and with familiar cultural objects’ (Grieshop, 2006:401). Therefore, in the experience of migrancy, food can be seen as such a cultural object, which aids to create ‘home away from home’ (Codesal, 2008: 7). Buying and consuming commodities from ‘home’ symbolizes the double belonging and enables time-space distanciation: the stretching of social systems across time and space (Mountz and Wright, 1996). Therefore food itself notably perpetuates the transnationalism by for example nurturing transnational ethnic entrepreneurship. There are for example ethnic cafes and deli restaurants or whole ethnic production taking place in the host country, such as Polish bakeries. In exchange, this enables migrants to live their transnational lives by giving them ‘ingredients’ to create a familiar home.

Moreover, according to Medina (2004), food is used for self-recognition as well as for differentiating oneself from others, which is a prominent element in the discussion of transnationalism and its bifocality. As Valentines (1999:491) argues, food is essential to the production of our identities and ‘helps us to construct and maintain individual narratives of the self’.
Hence Valentines argues that migrants use food to maintain and transmit their cultural identity, to acknowledge that they are rooted in some other place. Again, there is the spatial argument emerging, or as Sara Ahmed (1999:341) puts it, migration implies ‘a spatial reconfiguration of an embodied self’. In other words, migration is fully experienced through body: a change in food, smells, flavors and people. Food habits play a role of a sustaining, cohesive and stabilizing force in a potentially threatening environment (James, 1997). On the other hand, according to the postmodern theory of consumers’ relative inability to resist change (adoption-diffusion model; Mennell et al, 1992), food and immigration includes an ongoing tension between continuity (habit) and change. Individual can rely on a habit, but an additional effort has to be made to accommodate change.

Methods

‘Come hungry, please!’

The data was collected by conducting 6 semi-structured interviews with university staff members or their spouses from Europe (Germany/Switzerland, Germany, Austria, Portugal, Turkey and France) who have been residing in the UK for at least 6 months. Cutting through nationalities, the group consisted of two families with little kids, two married couples living together and two people living on their own. This variable necessary influences food culture and the participants were greatly aware of that:

   Participant A: ‘Sometimes it is hard to find energy [to cook] when it’s just you, but when there is another person...’

The interview usually lasted for less than one hour. Five of them were recorded, one participant preferred me taking notes while interviewing her. Moreover, naturally following from the topic, three participants invited me to share a meal or a drink with them in their homes which provided an opportunity for a brief, ad-hoc participant observation. The other ones were conducted in their offices or elsewhere on campus. In the end, the observation was used to complement the interview data, instead of participants’ journal which was initially proposed as another way of sharing their thoughts. Due to its time-demanding nature, all but one participant opted out of the possibility to write a journal for a week after the interview.

For the purposes of this study, the snowballing method of sampling appeared to be the most appropriate. The woman I worked for as a babysitter - a researcher herself - was my initial gatekeeper in the community of staff’s spouses. She sent an e-mail on my behalf to her friends, whom she had
previously talked to and who seemed to be interested. Secondly, in the course of the research I was also introduced to the other people who worked at university and were interested in being interviewed, subsequently introducing me to other prospective participants.

After interviewing the second participant, an interesting topic challenging the framework emerged. Neither of the respondents identified themselves as a migrant (see discussion in Findings). Being too immersed in the topic, I forgot that ‘...field researcher must start with the premise that words and symbols used in their own worlds may have different meanings in the worlds of their informants.’ (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998:64) This was very significant for getting access to prospective respondents, since there was a zero response rate from people approached by my gatekeeper. After the second interview I got back to my initial introductory e-mail inviting prospective participants which she sent out and while re-reading it, I realized that the connection with ‘migration’ - something they might not see as a defining part of their identity - might be a discouraging element. Therefore I redrafted my initial introductory e-mail which then sounded more approachable, friendly and informal (copying the style of the gatekeeper who introduced me as a ‘family friend who needs families to talk about food’, not mentioning migration). This attempt was eventually more successful, although it is hard to judge if it was caused solely by the redraft, or for example giving them more time to think about their participation.

**Findings**

**I am not a migrant**

Originally, a question about migrancy was not included at all. However, when my first respondent replied to the invitation to the project with ‘Sure, as long as you consider me a migrant!’ I recognized that this issue needs to be addressed as well.

In the end, only one respondent instantly identified herself as a migrant, after prompting the question. For the rest, the immediate answer was no. Although reluctant to define themselves as migrants, mostly due to the negative discourse surrounding this topic, all of them distance themselves from ‘being British’, seeing themselves as someone who does not permanently belong, often using the word ‘foreigner’:

Participant E: ‘I certainly don’t see myself as a British. I kind of tend to think about myself as European.’

Participant D: ‘I see myself as a guest. I behave like a guest and I want people to treat me that way.’
This greatly influences their food habits and diet: Levenstein (1985) argues that migrants try to maintain their diet and eating habit as long as possible, even against the pressure to change them. However, this was not the case in this study, apart from one occasion. Because they do not feel threatened (see James, 1997, discussed above), they do not preserve their habits, but can be quite flexible and accommodate new things. This is also an illustration of Montanari’s (2006: 89) argument about the multiple identities: ‘the fact that I am a European citizen does not prevent me from being an Italian citizen (...) there is no contradiction between eating in McDonald’s and then going home for tagliatelle.’ In this way, food enables respondents to express many of the identities that define them, be it a migrant, a mother, a housewife, or an academic:

Participant E: ‘We are kind of mixed identity, confused identity. Maybe that’s also reflected in our cooking.’

Transnationalism: stretching culture over time and space

Another reason why participants might feel at ease with their current diet, accommodating both traditional and new habits, is the availability of products from their home country. Apart from one, all respondents use ingredients from their home country on a more or less regular basis. Their first port of call is usually supermarkets, thus indicating the transnational nature of modern economy. However, there was also an opposition to the quality of produce marketed as from their home country. It was recognized that these products are often tailored to British tastes, thus making the meanings for migrants ambivalent. Moreover, all participants using products from home countries admitted that they receive them from their visitors or take them with them when they return:

Participant F: ‘That’s the only requirement for them (laugh). Don’t have to pay anything, just bring me some stuff.’

Adaptation vs assimilation

All newcomers situate themselves on a continuum going from a total refusal of anything unfamiliar to total acceptance of everything new: the tension between neophobia (the fear of being poisoned) and neophilia (the curiosity to try new food), a concept called ‘omnivore’s paradox’ developed by Claude Fischler (1988: 277 - 297). Hence all participants range from one side to another: one participant decided to cook only ‘British’, or rather local food, whereas another has tried almost nothing from British cuisine.
Reasons for a selective adoption of British food culture vary, ranging from environmental awareness (consuming local and seasonal produce is more environmentally friendly than import) to time-convenience (buying takeaways because of the lack of time to cook). These respective categories, such as environmental consciousness or a focus on time-management are also integral to the overall identities of the respective participants. The same was valid for the participant who deliberately decided to avoid British food, explaining it by her unwillingness to experiment and, more importantly, the uncertainty of whether or not the food preparation (when eating out) fulfils conditions set by her religion. This is described by Mennell et al (1992) as cultural incompatibility and that is a barrier to adoption on an individual level.

Few weeks after their arrival to the UK seemed to be very specific for some participant’s food routine. Participants living alone, or more precisely the ones moving to the Britain alone, acknowledged more the capacity of food to ‘create home away from home’ in the early months of their stay.

Participant B: ‘Sometimes it is also kind of therapy, if you are homesick, or something and you know that you can cook something that reminds you of home.’

Participant F: ‘So I came to the foreign country and I didn’t speak very well, I can’t say at all but very poor English so it’s like you go for something you know, it is kind of reassuring.’

**Food as a social practice**

‘We do not invite each other simply to eat and drink, but to eat and drink together,’ says one of Plutarch’s characters (Montanari, 2006:93). And sharing a meal emerged as a significant factor in creating respondents’ social identity and accommodating the change after the move, as can be seen from the following examples. In one case, this routine was disrupted very much as eating with friends and family was a defining feature of participant’s food culture, illustrated by the only photos in the living room showing a large group of people sitting around a table. For another respondent, the lack of people from ‘home’ was the reason not to eat food from home because she cannot eat it without them. For another participant, changing the work routine meant changing an eating routine as well:

Participant A: ‘My husband discovered that his colleagues don’t go to lunch together as it was in [home country]. When we got here he expected this routine and it was important to be there around lunch time but he discovered that there was nobody to go with. Therefore he comes home more often.’
Although none of the respondents identified the growing trend of eating out as specifically British, they all noticed that when they are invited for a meal from their British friends, this happens outside house, against their habits of inviting friends over for a dinner.

**Conclusion**

Food as a determining part of our culture allows us to express our identity. Since migrants’ identity can be often contested, living dual lives, it is also the food culture that enables them to negotiate new environments. On a neophobic-neophillic continuum, participants in this study selectively adopted new habits while retaining most of them. Since they did not primarily define themselves as migrants, and neither do the people in their surroundings see them as such, they do not feel threatened, pressured to maintain their food culture at any expense. However, shortly after their arrival, mostly for the ones who arrived alone, ‘food from home’ provides comfort, helping them to accommodate to the new environment without having to change absolutely everything. Furthermore, the study raises a number of questions for prospective research. Firstly it is the observation that participants did not identified themselves as migrants. This could be further explored within the concept of migrancy as a social category developed by Näre (2013). She defines it as a structure of legislative and general practices imposed on people viewed as migrants by outsiders and very rarely embraced by migrants themselves. Why does not a particular group of people identify themselves as migrants? Who do they identify as migrants? Näre proposes that this category should be studied alongside other social classification, like gender, class or education. Secondly, this study also contributes to the policy debate about the concept of transnationalism and its implications. It does reiterate the possibility of double belonging through the most intimate channels – food and eating. In a bigger picture it means that politicians do not have to be concerned about double loyalty and for example can issue dual passports as well as multiple-entrance visa. Living a transnational live, the migrant is ‘loyal’ to both countries.

**Bibliography**


