Transitioning from Home to University

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Extended abstract - Title: Transitioning from home to university: navigating liminality through student food practices

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Introduction

Eating is a part of everyday life and can often be routine, a mundane act that is engaged in purely to fuel bodies and sustain life. At other times eating is far from mundane, it can be a source of emotional as well as physical nourishment (Trees and Dean 2018) associated with celebratory rituals and is an important part of our material culture that shapes our relationships (Ellis 2018).

This study focuses on the food practices of young people transitioning into emerging adulthood at UK universities. In the United Kingdom, the move to University often involves a move away from a family home, where feeding the family and the work this entails largely falls upon the mother (Cairns and Johnston 2015). As students begin their university life, they also face the challenge of shopping, cooking and catering for themselves for the first time. Viewing student life as a transitional space, this paper explores the ways in which students develop food practices to navigate this transitory period and in particular the way they connect to family and friends as part of this process.

Transitioning into young adulthood via university life

George (1993: 360) identified three significant transitions that take place in early adulthood; the first is leaving full time education, the second is obtaining full time employment and the third is getting married or committing to a long-term relationship. Leaving school, for a substantial proportion of the population, means enrolling in higher education. For example, in 2020 37.0% (570,475) of 18 year olds in the UK were accepted at university (Bolton 2023).

For many students in the UK the move to university means leaving the family home on a temporary basis, which provides the freedom of being an adult with a degree of guidance from authority figures, including their family and the institutional structures within the university. Life at university is for many, therefore, the site of this important transitory phase between living as an adolescent and part of a family unit to living as an independent young adult (Arnett 2000).

Family food habits and parental feeding practices have been shown to have a significant impact on the health of children's own eating practices (Haines et al. 2019). For example, families who eat together more frequently have a healthier diet and dining together also enables parents to model healthy eating and establish connections with adolescent children (Dwyer et al. 2015). Children who have been encouraged by parents to help in the preparation of meals leads also go on to have healthier diets (Berge et al. 2016).

The relative independence of student life includes freedom with respect to food practices and around how, when, what and with whom young people eat. In this period the practices and rituals learned from family may be retained but they can also be abandoned or challenged, as students encounter and develop new practices and routines. Food plays an important role physiologically in students lives, in terms of ensuring adequate nutrition for physical and mental health and for maintaining academic performance (Florence et al. 2008) as well as developing a healthy lifestyle in both the short and long term, but it is also important for social reasons during this transitory period, as it can help to initiate, maintain and develop routines, and form connections and new friendships.

As students navigate this transition to early adulthood, they may have an idea (informed by past experience) of how they would like to manage their food consumption but may be limited in putting this into practice by a range of factors including time and finance which mean they are unable to buy fresh food, and opt for convenience or fast food options instead. This contrast between learned food knowledge and day to day food consumption practices may be an intrinsic part of student's transitional food practices and was also reflected in Obande and Young's (2019) study revealing that university students had good knowledge but poor practices around safe food storage.

Liminality

The term liminality is derived from the Latin word "limes" meaning threshold and has been used in anthropological terms with reference to rites of passage (Van Gennep 1991). Rites of passage refers to the movement from one social position to another, and liminality refers to the transitionary phase between one stage and another. In the liminal phase individuals can find themselves in neither the old nor the new social position, but betwixt and between the two. We argue that life at university for students is one such liminal phase; in this phase established social structures associated with life at home are disrupted as they move away and take on increased responsibility and independence and new social structures are in the process of being established. As students navigate this period we look at how they approach and adapt their food practices and examine the role played by old and new connections ('communitas', Huseman et al. 2016) with others. The paper utilises Darveau and Cheikh-Ammar's (2021) theoretical framework of liminality in consumer research. Their model shows how the transition from preliminal, to liminal to postliminal can be interpreted through four modes: time, space, position and body. With reference to these four modes,

this paper considers the behaviours that enable and embrace liminality, those which seek to overcome liminality and those which serve to hold off liminality.

Methodology

The research is based on in-depth semi structured interviews conducted with 25 students in the United Kingdom, in their first year of university and no longer living at home. They were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling. The interviews took place and were recorded via Zoom as it enabled the participants to remain in their own environment where they would feel more comfortable, it removed the inconvenience of travelling and it allowed a geographically dispersed sample to be obtained. The interviews lasted between 24 and 80 minutes. The students were compensated for their time with a £20 voucher redeemable at a number of high street stores. The interviews were transcribed and thematic coding was used to analyse the data (Braun and Clarke 2006).

Prior to the interview the participants were asked to photograph their main meal every day for a week and send these to the researchers ahead of the interview. These photographs were used in the interviews to elicit conversation (Warren 2006) around the students' food practices covering the topics of budgeting and planning, preparing and cooking and consumption.

Table 1 provides an overview of the participants' basic demographic data. More males than females were interviewed and the vast majority of the sample lived in University accommodation which involved sharing a kitchen with 4 to 9 other students. A minority of students lived in private accommodation.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Preliminary findings

Following on from the work of Darveau and Cheikh-Ammar (2021), initial analysis reveals that participants engage in a range of food practices during their first year of student life. Some of the practices embrace the period of transition and liminality, using the opportunity to experiment and try out news things. Others work to overcome liminality and transition to a more independent living in terms of food consumption and others serve to postpone liminality and the transition.

1) Food practices which help students adapt to the experience of transition and liminality - When moving to university students are often in shared accommodation with other people in the same situation as themselves; the shared kitchen thus becomes a space in which to form a communitas of shared experiences. Within this space participants used food to make connections with others. It was a way of initiating conversation through discussing ingredients, passing on cookery tips or learning new recipes. Food was also a way to offer friendship and demonstrate kindness, for example baking cookies or cake specifically to share with others. In some cases participants reported how space was used to develop more formal approaches to sharing and connecting with others, for example using a specific shelf in the fridge on which to placed items that they wanted to share out. Other examples included individuals placing their kitchen equipment in the shared space for everyone to use. Technology was also utilised to develop a shared approach to domestic tasks, for example one student discussed a Whatsapp group which was used to highlight when the kitchen should be cleaned and arranging a time for all to do this.

A number of participants reported that they had organised specific times and events for social connections to form. For example, some had organised and/or participated in a "Come Dine With Me" type of experience, whereby flatmates took it in turns preparing a three course meal which was consumed and then rated by the group. Others discussed how they organised pizza making evenings whereby everyone would make and then eat the pizza together. Sometimes the participants said they learned through experimenting with food together with their friends. *"We just, yeah, we… So we just come up with meals we want to try out, and we just make them together. We'll go out and buy the ingredients and just, yeah, random meals. " (Participant 15).* They adjusted to the new social position of having to cook for themselves by experimenting and trying out and learning new things, often in a collective way.

2) Food practices which seek to overcome liminality –participants also discussed food practices which were done at home to reduce feelings of ambiguity and discomfort. Some participants aware they were entering a transitory phase made an effort to learn how to cook for themselves prior to leaving for university. They watched their parents cook and often asked them how to make specific dishes they enjoyed e.g rice and vegetables. This enabled them to replicate these dishes at university and remind them of home.*" Uhm, I think this (*jacket potato, tuna mayo cheese) *just reminds me of home, to be honest."(Participant 25).* Before she left home, one participant, together with her mother, made a list of favourite family dishes which would be suitable to cook at University. Another, having noticed his mom had collected recipes she used in a folder, noted down some of these recipes in a notebook. Respondents also took equipment from home to

university to enable them to make the dishes they cook at home, for example Participant 23 took a rice cooker so she could make her favourite rice and stew dish.

3) Food practices which seek to hold off liminality – These practices meant that although they now lived away from home, students would not have to engage fully in the provisioning of food. In these examples, the actions of family members played an important part in the provision of food and can be seen to delay the transition to an independent adult. One participant was given strict instructions not to waste time cooking, as to do so would distract them from their studies. *"So, cooking wise, she knew I wasn't gonna get around to cooking and she didn't want me to cook as well, 'cause she knew that I'll waste my time cooking instead of studying. Also, she was, like, yeah, just order food and stuff."* *(Participant 19).* In order that the student didn't 'waste' time cooking, he was provided with a credit card for eating out every day. Similarly, an international participant's parents introduced their child to family and friends in the UK who would have him to dinner so he too, did not have to cook. Other parents tried to reduce the financial pressure and the need for their children to budget through providing them with a credit card for food purchases which they paid off. Other participants stated that their parents provided them with food, thus easing budgeting and/or cooking requirements. When the participants were initially dropped off at university parents would provide them with bulk basic ingredients e.g. rice. Other students regularly went home and would return with food, either entire meals or ingredients. Similarly, parents would visit the participants and bring food with them either entire meals, stocks of basic ingredients or expensive ingredients. *"Well, if my parents come, then they'll bring me lamb, 'cause, uh, that's quite expensive, so I get them to buy me that."* *(Participant 17).*

Conclusions

The study reveals that in this emerging adulthood phase, students use established food practices to bring comfort and familiarity into the liminal space but they also develop their food practices through experimentation. Time, space and connections with others, whether they be family or friends, can serve to enhance or impede this experimentation. Higher education institutions need to support students in their adaptation to university life and to develop healthier student communities. This requires providing information and support in this transitional phase, perhaps linking cooking to physical and mental wellbeing and emphasising how they can consistently eat healthily with a multitude of demands on their time.

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Table 1: The Interviewees' Sex, Ethnic Origin and Accommodation at University

Variable	Variable Categories	Number
Sex	Male	14
	Female	11
Ethnic origin	White	8
	Indian	5
	Pakistani	1
	African	6
	Chinese	1
	Caribbean	1
	Other	1
Accommodation	University self catering accommodation	16
	Living alone (private rental/ownership)	3
	Shared house (private rental)	1