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Young adults' use of emotional food memories to build resilience

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ABSTRACT

The overall aim of this study is to specifically investigate how young adults make use of emotional-relational food memories related to "significant others" during childhood when trying to build resilience and solve developmental tasks in this period of life. A theoretical sample of three semi-structured interviews drawn from a larger sample of 30 interviews with young adults in Sweden formed the basis for analysis, guided by the steps of a phenomenologically oriented critical narrative analysis. The results illustrate three different overall directions in how the relationship to food can evolve throughout life among young adults: a relationship dominated by 1) positive emotional food memories associated with the use of food as a secure base and 2) negative emotional food memories associated with either a) being emotionally preoccupied with food or b) dismissing food. The results suggest that internalised memories related to food associated with positive emotions can be used to build resilience, by helping young people to adapt and better manage developmental stress. Internalised food memories related to negative emotions can cause vulnerability, but also become the object of a person's reconstruction. The implications and potential risks of using food practice for developing resilience and a healthy lifestyle are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Young adults commonly use food choice and mealtimes in everyday life to narrate their own life story (Devine, 2005) and form an identity, for example as a vegetarian or a vegan (Larsson, Rönnlund, Johansson, & Dahlgren, 2003). Positive childhood memories are acknowledged as one aspect in the strategies of young people trying to use food to increase their well-being (von Essen & Englander, 2013). Life stories about food (Patching & Lawler, 2009) related to the original family in childhood are formed in interaction with role models (Prichard, Hodder, Hutchinson, & Wilson, 2012; Ristovski-Slijepcevic, Chapman, & Beagan, 2010) and significant others with whom they regularly share meals (Paisley, Beanlands, Goldman, Evers, & Chappell, 2008). Specific traditions and habits of preparing food and arranging mealtimes are associated with emotional experiences (Devine, 2005; Lupton, 1996; Rozin, 2005b; White et al., 2015) taking place in daily life and formed in the context of tradition, family and a discourse in society (Meiselman, 2008) with specific ideals (Rozin, 2005a) taboos and value systems (aan het Rot, Moskowitz, Hsu, & Young, 2015; Kaufmann, 2010; Solér & Plazas, 2012). Different dishes and meals help to add rhythm to everyday life (Mäkelä, 2000) and meal events provide opportunities for social meetings and togetherness (DeVault, 1991). Preparing, cooking and serving food is described as an "unexpressed intimacy" (Sidenvall, Nydahl, & Fjellström, 2000) in which good and memorable meals become associated with family and friends and positive emotional states (Piqueras-Fiszman & Jaeger, 2015).

"Resilience" is a concept describing how an individual manages milestones during periods of life in a constructive way (Masten, Cutuli, Herbers, & Reed, 2009) by drawing on inner resources of mental flexibility and vitality (Bowlby, 1973/1998; Masten & O'Dougherty Wright, 2010). From a developmental psychology perspective, food is suggested to be a useful element in such strategies as used by young adults to become well differentiated and separate beings in the world (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Activities related to food could be understood as some of those self-comforting and protective activities described in the literature (Mikulincer, Dolev, & Shaver, 2004; Zilcha-Mano, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2012). An indication of protective mechanisms (Masten & O'Dougherty Wright, 2010; Reich, Zautra, & Hall, 2010) being at work is the person exploring and experimenting in activities associated with expressions of playfulness, joy, comfort,

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contentment (Fredrickson, 2001; Sable, 2007) and self-compassion (Neff & McGehee, 2010).

According to attachment theory, one of the most important factors for developing resilience is the experience of having a secure base (Bowlby, 1969/1997). Important persons taking part in situations characterised by a positive relational atmosphere contribute to a feeling of being cared for (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Sroufe, 2005). Internalised memories of more or less secure situations form internal working models transferred to the next generation (Ainsworth, 1969; Bowlby, 1990). Security is associated with emotional confidence and competence and is the prerequisite for being able to reflect more mindfully about oneself and others (Allen, 2013) and for forming patterns which can be more or less protective for us or contribute to vulnerability (Bowlby, 1988).

An important developmental task during the transition to adulthood (Thorne, 2000; Valentine, 2003) is to take on the challenge of obtaining coherence and direction in life (McAdams, 2006). The period can be understood as a “second chance” (Masten & O'Dougherty Wright, 2010) to build supportive relationships and conditions fostering a feeling that life will improve (Arnett, 2007; Bauer, McAdams, & Pals, 2008; Masten et al., 2004, 2009). To be able to do this, one sometimes has to re-evaluate (Luecken & Gress, 2010, p. 242) a negative role model (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Ristovski-Slijepcevic et al., 2010). Food can be an important mediator of such “turning points” in the life narrative (Devine, 2005; Rönkä, Oravala, & Pulkkinen, 2003) of a young person and act as a buffer against uncomfortable memories (Scheel, 2011).

While earlier studies show how the choice of organic food among young adults is experienced as an overall self-therapeutic intervention (von Essen & Englander, 2013; von Essen & Martensson, 2014), this study specifically investigates the role of emotional-relational food memories and “significant others” when young adults try to build resilience and solve developmental tasks on their way to adulthood.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and selection

The study draws on a purposeful sample (Patton, 2002) of three interviews from a larger corpus of 30 interviews with young adults in the age span between 18 and 35 (Young et al., 2011) about their choice of food as part of a strategy for health and well-being (von Essen & Englander, 2013). “A narrative self through emotional-relational food memories” was acknowledged as one of the “constituents” when trying to describe the strategy of these young people (von Essen & Englander, 2013). The original interviews were carried out by the first author in the participants' homes, focusing on young adults' thoughts and feelings about and experiences towards organic food from an individual perspective.

Theories on place attachment have been used to improve our understanding of how food as part of the physical environment can play a part in human development (Giuliani, 2003), making it possible to understand food as an intimate form of restorative contact with nature (von Essen & Martensson, 2014). However, acknowledging the important role of interpersonal relationships in the narratives on food make it equally relevant to inquire into the relative contribution of “significant others” (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Allen, 2013). We drew a strategic sample informed by the theory on attachment. Each one of three narratives was selected as representing one of the three different overall patterns commonly described as characteristic for intimate emotional relationships (Ainsworth et al., 1978, pp. 303–315). To avoid overgeneralizing from theories of attachment to the broader field of how people attach to objects and place (Giuliani, 2003), we refrained from applying the more specific terminology of attachment theory and stay close to the original wordings of the participants throughout the data analysis and the following interpretations in the discussion.

The sample consisted of the narratives of three young adults: 1) Marcus, a 29-year-old university student who lives with several other people in a commune centrally in a city and describes himself as lactose intolerant and vegan; 2) Linn, a 24 -year-old woman on parental leave with a one-year-old child, living in a suburb, who describes herself as having a focus on health in life, mostly eating organic food, but switching between periods when she is a vegetarian and periods in which she is restrictive and only eats energy-rich food; 3) Emelie, a 23 -year-old woman who recently started a new relationship, lives in a city and studies at university and describes how she has been switching between eating vegetarian food and being an omnivore.

2.2. Data compilation and analysis

The overall strategy for analysing these three narratives was a phenomenologically oriented critical narrative analysis including the use of imaginative variations (Langdridge, 2007, pp. 129–152). This means that the researchers in their consciousness vary and clarify the descriptions to arrive at a point where the descriptions no longer can be varied, without implying a different way of understanding the concrete experiences (Langdridge, 2007, pp. 129–152). A basic psychological understanding of the narrative is needed to carry this out: “The key point here is that in this step the statements of the subjects are transformed by the researcher to be in accord with the researcher's disciplinary intuition, which become stabilized after the process of free imaginative variations” (Giorgi, 1997, p. 6). What distinguishes the “phenomenologically directed critical narrative” from other methods for narrative analysis, is its attention to critical moments in the life history of the person from a psychological perspective, in which the human being is regarded as an existential subject and emphasis is given to the distinct form of the narrative as it is told.

We used the following five steps in the analysis: 1) The interviews were read and listened to in order to get a good insight into the content and overall meaning from the perspective of the person. 2) The main narrative and other shorter (sub-) narratives were identified by acknowledging changes and delimitations (Mattingly, 1994) adding new directions or departures for orientation, sometimes detected by slight shifts in the tone of the narrator (Arvidsson, 1998). The way the different (sub-) narratives were used, added together and structured was acknowledged to form a beginning, a middle and an end (Langdridge, 2007, pp. 129–152). 3) Clarification was sought about who the person is, as reflected in the material. How does this person present herself/himself? How does this person want to appear in relation to the issue under study? What type of person will this narrative create in reality to the subject being studied, the young adult's relationship to food? 4) The theme of the narratives was identified by acknowledging key themes, subthemes and their mutual relationships, without breaking down the narrative into smaller units. 5) A synthesis of the results was formulated, in which original wordings in the transcripts are fused with the “critical narratives”.

During the analysis, we used young adults' daily narratives describing different events and memories from the time they grew up (Fivush, Habermas, Waters, & Zaman, 2011) to create a whole, a life narrative well depicting the evolving adult life (Arnett, 2000; Bluck & Habermas, 2000). We focused attention on how they presented relationally anchored memories (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Thorne, 2000), if there were particular persons named and

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