



Cultural specificity in food choice – The case of ethnography in Japan



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ABSTRACT

Previous studies examining food choice from a cross-cultural perspective were based primarily on quantitative research using the Food Choice Questionnaire (FCQ). This study suggests ethnography as a complementary research method in cross-cultural food choice studies.

While use of the FCQ resulted in findings of cultural differences in food choice processes, within a preliminary motive list, ethnography allows the exploration of new, possibly culture-specific motives for food choice. Moreover, ethnography allows a deeper understanding of the cultural background of food choice processes in a studied culture.

Using Japan as a case study, this research demonstrates the use of ethnography to argue that variety is a primary motive for food choice in contemporary Japanese culture. Variety is hence regarded here as a part of a larger food culture attribute, an “adventurous palate,” which can also provide a background for previous FCQ findings (Prescott, Young, O’neill, Yau, & Stevens, 2002).

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1. Introduction

Furthering the understanding of the human food choice process is of importance due to its involvement in many current social and economic issues, among them the efforts invested in promoting a healthful lifestyle and distribution and marketing challenges in the global food market (Carrillo, Varela, Salvador, & Fiszman, 2011; Dawson, 2013; Dressler & Smith, 2013; Insch & Jackson, 2013). The issue of food choice has therefore been thoroughly examined in various studies, exploring the contribution of different factors, among them biological, psychological, economic, as well as cultural (Drewnowski, 1997; Furst, Connors, Bisogni, Sobal, & Falk, 1996; Konttinen, Männistö, Sarlio-Lähteenkorva, Silventoinen, & Haukkala, 2010).

This study will discuss cultural affiliation as a factor involved in food choice. Food-related choices are affected by culturally-defined practices passed on from one generation to the next (Aboud, 2011), and thus, while people are physically able to consume numerous foodstuffs, membership in a certain culture, considerably narrows acceptable options (Fieldhouse, 1995).

1.1. Expressions of cultural effect on adults and children

The effect of culture on food choice was observed among adults,

who perceived “normal” eating behaviors in their society as a reference point for their own food choices during interviews (Bisogni, Connors, Devine, & Sobal, 2002). It was also found in children, who, while discussing their food choice processes, appeared to rely on social acceptability more than on health considerations (Ross, 1995).

1.2. Cross-cultural implications

Cultural influence on food choice was also noted in studies using the Food Choice Questionnaire (FCQ) (Steptoe, Pollard, & Wardle, 1995). These studies concluded that motives for food choice are prioritized differently in different cultures. For example, Russians were much more attuned to food availability, in comparison with other cultures (Honkanen & Frewer, 2009); sensory appeal (taste, appearance, texture, and smell) was found more important to participants of European descent; Filipino consumers were more affected by mood (Januszewska, Pieniak, & Verbeke, 2011); health factors held precedence for Chinese-origin participants; and Japanese considered price as significant, and sensory appeal as less crucial (Prescott et al., 2002).

The cited studies all used the original FCQ (Steptoe et al., 1995), or its modified version (Lindeman & Väänänen, 2000), yet it is clear, that as a measure constructed from data derived from one specific culture (British), the FCQ is limited in its ability to offer extended cultural backgrounds to cross-cultural differences and might also not take into account motives relevant to cultures absent from the

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initial data pool (Prescott et al., 2002; Steptoe et al., 1995).

Taking Japan as an example, there is a gap in the understanding of cultural settings connected with the lesser importance the Japanese ascribe to sensory appeal. There is also a lack of knowledge regarding culturally-related food choice motives unique to contemporary¹ Japanese culture.

Use of alternative methodological approaches may prove effective in the effort to minimize these gaps. Ethnography shall be discussed in this article as a viable research method for the study of specific cultural food choice characteristics in the broader context of cross-cultural differences.

2. Material and methods

2.1. Ethnography as a cultural research method

As a qualitative research method, ethnography offers a means for close examination of cultural phenomena, compared to most quantitative methods. It is designed to enable a deeper investigation of different aspects of social life. The ethnographer strives to represent the studied phenomenon the way it is manifested in the field, as compared to laboratory or survey methodologies (Olliffe & Bottorff, 2006). Learning about social or cultural phenomena within their natural settings is considered crucial for understanding certain human behaviors, since they are significantly influenced by the setting (Wilson, 1977).

In ethnography, data is collected while conducting field work and applying participant observations: taking part in the daily life of the studied culture, usually for a long period of time, using personal experience, informal conversations, and interviews, in addition to documents and artifacts of various kinds, as multiple sources of information for analysis (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

2.1.1. Theoretical implications

As a qualitative research method grounded in a constructivist view, ethnography strives to learn the way reality is constructed by people of a studied culture (Bernard, 2006). Ethnographic description integrates the emic view of people from within the studied culture, and the interpretative etic view of the researcher who is typically an outsider. A combination of these two perspectives can facilitate an understanding of the studied culture within its own parameters, as well as in comparison with other cultures (Befu, 1989; Sanjek, 2000). In the current study, this technique enables a discussion about unique qualities of contemporary Japanese food culture which might otherwise not come to light.

Unlike some other research methods, ethnographic research categories are not determined a priori, but are generated a posteriori from the data collected in the course of field work, thus affording an opportunity to make use of a deep acquaintance with the social environment before drawing a theoretical framework (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). This aspect of ethnography could prove effective in the search for culturally-specific food choice motives.

2.2. Limitations

It is important to assert in advance that knowledge produced by means of ethnographic methodology has certain constraints. Ethnography is an interpretive study which deals with people's perceptions and beliefs rather than with numerical data. Its product, as a written composition, is subject to the experience and

expressive choices of the ethnographer, an individual influenced by political, economic, academic, and other considerations (Van Maanen, 2011). Therefore, the quality of the empirical data and theoretical claims of an ethnographic study cannot be assessed by the quantitative concepts of validity and reliability, but rather by different criteria, such as “trustworthiness,” as elucidated by Guba and Lincoln (Guba & Lincoln, 1985; Guba, 1981). Among the acceptable criteria for trustworthiness are: triangulation, the use of multiple sources for data collection or analysis in order to examine a certain social phenomenon from various perspectives (Creswell, 2009); rich, thick descriptions, detailed and contextualized in a way that enables the reader to make an autonomous decision regarding the transferability of the specific claims (Geertz, 1973); and reflexive account of the personal status and circumstances of the ethnographer in the field (Davies, 2008).

2.3. Aims of the study

The aims of this study are twofold. Methodologically, it suggests ethnography as a complementing approach to questionnaire methodology in cross-cultural food choice research, highlighting its unique contribution to acquiring a deep understanding of cultural backgrounds and specificities of such choice processes. Theoretically, it offers a new construct, which is not included in the FCQ, and could enrich the scientific view on contemporary Japanese food choice processes.

This article presents findings from a larger ethnographic study for which field work was conducted intermittently in Japan, since 2005, accompanied by ongoing research through correspondence with informants and content analysis of media material.

The author conducted participant observation in cooking-school lessons over the course of a year and a half, took part in many formal and informal food-related gatherings, and conducted interviews with 26 Japanese women and two Japanese men, between the ages of 12–60. All these and other daily conversations and practices, together with various documents and media sources connected with food, such as cookbooks, advertisements, Internet sites and blogs, informational pamphlets, television shows, etc., were documented and analyzed according to the ethnographic method.

3. Results and discussion

The current article's focus is on ethnographic findings regarding a food choice motive specific to contemporary Japanese food culture: *variety*.

Variety as a primary motive will be described from three perspectives: 1. within the frame of a traditional Japanese meal; 2. across locations; 3. across time. A description of the socialization into variety in food choice as a cultural schema shall follow, introducing an attribute connected with Japanese food culture, termed here, the *adventurous palate*. The subsequent passage defines variety in the context of the discussed phenomenon, stressing attention given to details and nuances. The report of the findings will conclude with a demonstration of the uniqueness of the described motive in the Japanese food culture (See *Illustration 1* for a visual representation of this structure).

Findings are formulated in the first person as customary in ethnographic writing.

3.1. Variety in the Japanese meal: one point in time and space

3.1.1. The Japanese-style meal: variety in appearance, flavors, and textures

The term *Washoku*—literally, Japanese meal—may appear traditional, but it is actually a neologism, coined in Japan during the

¹ Throughout this article, unless otherwise indicated, any mention of Japanese, Japanese culture, or Japanese cuisine, will refer to descriptions of contemporary Japan.

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