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The social meaning and function of household food rituals in preventing food waste

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Abstract

Many studies have blamed consumers for their behaviors leading to food wastage, and a growing body of literature is analyzing the specific dynamics of everyday domestic food practices in terms of food waste. This study draws on these recent social practice theory studies to analyze the social meaning behind the practice of discarding food and the role that household food rituals play: (1) in shaping the social meaning of food and (2) in spurring care about food waste (and ultimately reducing the amount of food wasted). Both Q-methodology and semi-structured interviews are applied to analyze the food rituals of 21 households in an Amsterdam neighborhood. The findings show that in ten out of the 21 households analyzed household food rituals help not only to shape the meaning households give to food but also to institutionalize care about food waste, thereby contributing to the decrease of the amount of food wasted at the household level. Despite its small sample, this research contributes to enlarge the body of literature that analyzes the potential role of household food rituals in institutionalizing a change in meaning regarding food waste. Also, by combining Q-methodology with semi-structured interviews, this study explores innovative methodological avenues for practice theory research investigation of household food waste.

Keywords: food waste, household food rituals, social practice theory, social meaning.

1. Introduction

Feeding a rapidly growing urban population is one of the challenges faced by our society. By 2050, nine billion people will need to be fed (Parfitt et al., 2010), and already 805 million people face daily hunger (FAO, IFAD, & WFP, 2014: 4). Many studies point out that food security is at risk (Dani, 2014; World Economic Forum, 2015), and increasing food production is no longer a desirable option, due to the consequences on climate change, including environmental degradation and loss of land, water, and energy resources (Aschemann-Witzel et al., 2015; Griffin et al., 2009). Taking into account that one third of the food produced for human consumption is lost or wasted along the supply chain – approximately 1.3 billion metric tons per year (Gustavsson et al., 2011; Herszenhorn et al., 2014; Institution of Mechanical Engineers, 2013; Parfitt et al., 2010), an optimized organization of the current food system is seen as the best approach to ensure that food intended for human consumption is indeed consumed by humans. There are two ways to work on this goal, by reducing food losses and food waste. Food losses take place at the production, post-harvest and processing stages in the food supply, while food waste happens at the end of the food chain, during the retail and consumption stages (Parfitt et al., 2010). While food losses are a bigger problem in developing countries, food wastage occurs mainly in developed countries (Gustavsson et al., 2011; Parfitt et al., 2010).

Reducing food waste is increasingly being targeted by European environmental agendas. For example, all EU Member States are working toward a framework that will enable the collection and reporting of levels of food waste across all sectors in a comparable way, with the aim to "halve per capita global food waste at the retail and consumer level, and reduce

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