FOOD, IDENTITY and the Immigrant Experience

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THIS PAPER EXAMINES THE DYNAMIC RELATIONSHIPS AMONG FOOD, SOCIAL IDENTITY AND THE IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE. AS A CULTURALLY AND SPATIALLY TRANSITIONAL STAGE, THE IMMIGRATION PROCESS INTRODUCES POSSIBILITIES FOR CHANGE, AS WELL AS RESISTANCE TO NEW HABITS, NEW BEHAVIOURS AND NEW CULTURAL EXPERIENCES. THESE CHANGES IN TURN AFFECT OUR PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH, OUR PERCEPTIONS OF SELF AND OUR RELATIONS WITH OTHERS. DRAWING FROM THE LITERATURE ON FOOD AND IDENTITY IT IS POSSIBLE TO OFFER SOME INSIGHTS INTO THIS CULTURAL TRANSITION AND ITS IMPACT ON IDENTITY. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH IN THIS FIELD EMERGING FROM THE IDENTITY SEMINAR HELD IN HALIFAX IN NOVEMBER 2001 WILL BE CONSIDERED.

FOOD SECURITY AND BELONGING IN A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY

Food is more than a basic source of nutrients; it is also a key component of our culture, central to our sense of identity. Identities, however, are not fixed social constructs, but are constructed and reconstructed within given social formations, reflecting the existing and imagined structural constraints and lived experiences of subjects.

Various individual, cultural, historical, social and economic influences shape our food choices. Our food choices, like various other cultural expressions and practices, offer insights on how we present ourselves, shape our identities, define our membership and express our distance from others. Changes in food preferences may also reflect changes in broader cultural perceptions and practices.

As a culturally and spatially transitional stage, the immigration process introduces possibilities of change and resistance to new habits, new behaviours and new cultural experiences. Especially in the case of new immigrants who deal with tensions of adaptation or resistance to changes in lifestyle, consumption patterns and forms of cultural expression have consequences on their physical and mental health, their perceptions of self and relations with others, as well as their potential for successful settlement and integration.

Food security for new immigrants implies, firstly, access to sufficient, nutritious and quality food at all times. Food security is part of "feeling at home." It is a comfort that is not only limited to or defined by access to food, but also access to the basic essentials of life offered to citizens in a modern state. Examples include an equitable and accessible work environment, housing, health care, public education and social services. The feeling of belonging, or identification with the host society, requires a subjective interpretation of inclusion and entitlement. Food security, as part of other aspects of a modern society, ensures that comfort.

In its broadest definition, food security includes, not only the availability of food at all times, but also accessibility to all. Equality of access, notions of entitlements and the basic rights of citizenship create public obligations for food security. This makes both the politics of equality and the politics of recognition relevant to food security concerns of new immigrants.

"Feeling at home" is not simply limited to having access to a nutritionally sufficient diet, but also to culturally appropriate foods. Belonging also requires "feeling welcome" in policy, in practice and in everyday symbolism. Both food security policy and citizenship policy need to be informed by the concerns and politics of "equality," as well as concerns and politics of "recognition." Others sharing "our" taste offers that symbolic welcome. Some dismiss the new cosmopolitan cuisine that is emerging in the global cities such as Toronto as a form of rhetorical folkloric multiculturalism with no positive structural impact on our everyday realities. While there is an element of truth in this dismissal, we believe that such an approach underestimates the significance of cosmopolitan diets in introducing a symbolic awareness of diversity, in challenging ethnocentrism and, for many, in creating a feeling of home away from home. If we learn and define who we are through what we eat, the multicultural cuisine may offer a glimpse of widening notions of identity, self and belonging in Canada. It is through sharing seemingly mundane everyday acts, such as eating, dressing and listening to music, that the cultural boundaries of membership become permeable.

IMMIGRANT IDENTITY AND FOODWAYS

As an essential component of our culture, food is also central to our sense of identity (Fischler, 1988). In their daily activities, people assume various identities, defining who they are and how they can live their lives. Cultural identity is expressed in various everyday practices, such as religious observations, rights of passage, language, leisure activities, clothing, art, literature and music (Bramadat 2001; Bhugra et al, 1999, Sobal, 1998). By observing cultural practices and preferences, such as food choice, we may gain valuable insights into the levels of individual or collective tendencies for:

adaptation: whether or to what extent individuals or social groups adapt to new patterns of cultural conduct, and willingly include different forms of behaviour into their everyday practices.

diversity: whether or to what extent society at large adopts new patterns of cultural conduct and willingly includes different forms of behaviour into everyday practices.

identification: how individuals and ethnic groups self-identify, or are identified by others as members of an ethnic group through certain cultural practices, such as clothing, music, food and religious observations.

distancing: the extent to which individuals are willing to interact and establish relationships with members of social groups other than their own.

integration: the ability of an individual or a social group to utilize and contribute to every dimension of economic, social, cultural and political activities in the society.

Moving between the boundaries of cultural and geographical space, the immigrant experience offers a rare glimpse into the fluidity of identity and the cultural boundaries of resistance and change. As a transitional status, the immigrant cultural experience also offers us insights into the complexity of patterns of relationships between dominant and minority groups, change and resistance, and patterns of "ethnic" experience, racism and identities. The literature on enculturation, identity retention and identity incorporation offers us the complex arrangements of ethnicity often resulting from the immigrant experience (Modood and Werbner, 1997). The fluid nature of the immigrant identity has even led some to argue the hybrid, or creolised identities reflecting the complexity of multicultural experience (Pieterse, 1995; Hannerz, 1987).

Immigrant diets and foodways need to be contextualized within a global framework where food choices are no longer limited to the social and cultural contexts of the country of immigration nor their country of origin (Bouchet, 1995; Cook and Crank, 1996). Modernity and globalization have been functioning as homogenizing influences, transforming not only the conditions of production and consumption, but also many cultural signifiers which have been used to demarcate ethnic identities and authenticities (Franke, 1987). However, adaptation and incorporation of these homogenizing influences have also presented a selective and fragmented form (Harbottle, 1996 and 1997). Resulting creolized identities include a bit of everything: local and global, traditional and modern, old and new (Hall, 1992:31-14).

In the global system, cultural meanings attached to food are often based on conflicting notions of physical health, aesthetics, tastes and social prestige, reflecting the contradictions between the private and public sphere, and often contradictory messages in the marketplace. Like food, identities are also creolised globally, and the immigrant experience reflects this complexity. One can never be certain to what extent changes in consumer behaviour reflect cultural incorporation or global diffusion.

Yet, identity formation is not just a subjective evaluation of membership at any given time isolated from the everyday lived experiences and realities of subjects. How one defines self and membership depends, not only on the

accumulation of unique cultural experiences and consumption patterns, but also on how others view the membership, entitlements and rights of personhood / citizenship of a particular individual or group. Membership, in the modern nation state, involves experiences of inclusion, empowerment, entitlement, rights and comforts or quality of life. In this sense, integration (the ability of an individual or a social group, free of systemic barriers, to utilize and contribute to every dimension of economic, social, cultural and political activity in the society) becomes an equally important component of identity formation.

For immigrants who go through a dramatic cultural and spatial transition, not only the familiarity of cultural experiences and consumption patterns, but also rights, entitlements and quality of life make important points of comparison between past and present, as these will have immediate effects on the health and well-being of immigrants and their families (Williamson, 1998). When we talk about food and foodways, we need to examine, not only familiarity, but also accessibility as an issue of identity formation. The feeling of belonging or identification with the host society cannot be achieved without full membership or integration. For this reason, food security, like other basic rights, needs to be conceived as an important analytical tool in evaluating how immigrants perceive their membership, and reconstruct their identity and integrate successfully (Welsh et al, 1998).

AN AGENDA FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Participants who attended a session on food at the Identity Seminar held in Halifax in 2001 generated several recommendations for furthering research in this area. The group discussed the ways in which the policy and praxis of multiculturalism over the years has shifted the prevalent paradigm from cultural retention to race relations, and most recently to civic participation. Discussants emphasized the need for research on variations among youth, the elderly, family units and mixed-marriage families towards food and identity. Children's food patterns present a unique set of challenges in terms of lunches that are not eaten but traded, the relative "prestige" of food (ethnic vs. mainstream), and the different kind of food children eat with their friends vs. food consumed at home usually prepared by their mothers.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH INCLUDE:

1. Exploration of food as an integrative or differentiative force in culture, especially with regard to youth; Research issues of social cohesion and identity formation.

2. Questions should be asked such as: Who has the choice? Who gets to eat and integrate? Who has the ability to access ingredients? What are some of the issues regarding power mediated through food?

3. A study about food that "travels." What are the things which we take with us across oceans and between boundaries? Develop research on the centrality of food as a medium of cultural symbolism, a token of "homeland" and "home culture."

4. Further exploration of the connection between food production and consumption, such as ethnic food categories – "old" foods and "new" foods.

5. Exploration of food as a site for community development. For example, Kosovars were placed in non-urban communities in Canada as part of a large-scale relocation program. What role does food play in chain migration, as an aid in providing comfort levels within a new community. Does food provide a site for forming community? Can it help to encourage the residence of ethnic communities in non-urban areas? What are the conditions for encouraging this dispersion?

6. More exploration of immigrant food networks. For example, a network analysis of food businesses would be useful. How do these networks operate? It was pointed out that Metropolis has a project that deals precisely with this issue, looking at Chinese food entrepreneurs in Canada, Australia and the Netherlands.

7. The need for a web niche on food (possibly through Metropolis) serving as a clearinghouse for information on food and identity research.

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