ABSTRACT

Defining “Food Agency”: An Ethnographic Exploration of Everyday Home Cooking Practices

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It has been widely suggested, by both popular and academic sources, that home cooking is in decline. Nutrition and public health scholars concern that a loss of cooking abilities may further diminish individuals’ control over their food choices, thus contributing to adverse health outcomes. Yet, even if they are cooking less, many individuals still maintain some relationship with the task. So, what sorts of skill and knowledge are required to prepare a meal in today’s food environment? This research explores the everyday practices of twenty-seven home-cooks in the Northeastern U.S. to illustrate a spectrum of experiences. Data was collected through videotaping and observing the home-cooks as they prepared typical dinnertime meals, followed-up with semi-structured interviews. The resulting videos, transcripts, and fieldnotes have been coded and analyzed following an iterative process. The data reveals a nuanced portrait of the opportunities and challenges that home-cooks are presented with, as well as a complex blend of skills, strategies, and general savvy they employ to get meals on the table under a diversity of circumstances. These observed practices are deemed to signify a capacity for “food agency,” a construct that situates cooking as part of a broad systemic process requiring the home-cook to structure their practices around a number of external forces—such as time, money, and access to ingredients. Incorporating this approach into future cooking interventions has the potential to help individuals not only ‘know how’ to cook, but to also feel better equipped to fit the practice into their daily routines.

Keywords: Home Cooking, Food Agency, Food Systems, Ethnographic Methods