

The Sociology of Food (London Winter Session)

Richard Patti, Dr. Debi Street

SUNY Buffalo

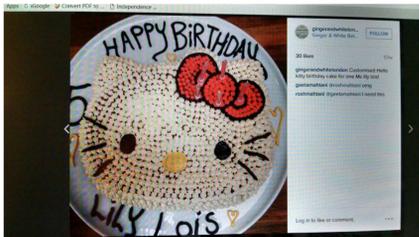
Introduction

In London, we did not conduct a scientific experiment of any sort. That's not to say that we didn't do anything scientific. We used perhaps the most valuable technique available to a social scientist. Participant observation. The three weeks in London was an opportunity to see how food has a role in almost every aspect of our daily life and to compare the role food played in the United Kingdom compared to America. From the bustling markets of Camden Town to the 37 story high Sky Garden, there were ample opportunities to witness food making its presence known in everyday life.



Questions

- What are the ways in which food shapes our daily lives?
- Can food indicate social status?
- How does a local café differ from a national chain?
- What are the aspects of food work and how does it change in different settings?
- How does British food culture differ from US food culture?

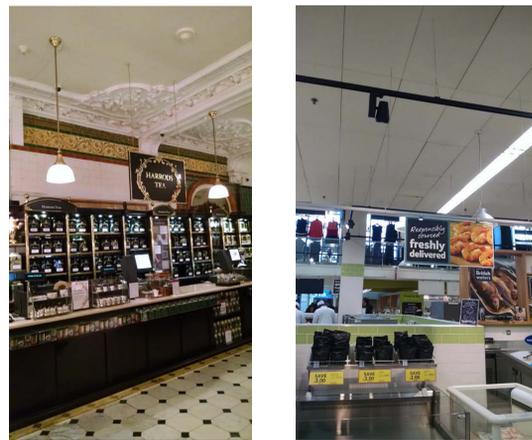


How Can Food Shape Our Daily Life?

Our schedules revolve around when we are going to eat. Breaks are taken at lunchtime. You are home from school or work by dinner time. Interactions revolve around food. Dates, company lunches, awards ceremonies, birthdays all use food as the centerpiece to bring people to the event. Want to get to know someone? Share a meal with them. Want to ask someone on a date? Offer them free food. We unknowingly let food drive so much of what we do everyday.

Food and Social Status

The food we eat can signal to others our spot on the social ladder. If the food is expensive it must mean we are of very high status. Where we buy food often allows us to create an identity for ourselves. Social media is dominated by pictures of food that allow us to tell everyone we know that what we are eating is pretty enough to be art. People in Britain who had a Harrods bag on their arm were seen in a different light than those walking around with a common, plastic Sainsbury's bag. People spend a lot of time deciding what they eat and where they get it in order to appear a certain way in the eyes of others.



Food Work

We went into the field and studied the differences between employees in different settings such as cafes, restaurants and markets. At Burroughs Market we were exposed to the relentless sales techniques of people not bound by retail regulations. They offered free samples, haggled on price and did anything they could to make a sale. Café and restaurant workers are expected to maintain a certain personality for the duration of their shift. This emotional labor is often harder for them than the actual work that they do. They must leave everything at the door and project the image of the cheerful restaurant worker.

Local Café vs. National Chain

We did a case study of the local Ginger White café and compared it to Starbucks, a national brand. Starbucks engages in hegemonic brandscaping, essentially monopolizing the market. These smaller cafes must offer high quality food and more variety to stay in business. In pretty much every small café there is going to be better food, better service and a better environment for customers. The only problem is that these places need to charge more in order to make a profit.



British Restaurants vs. US Restaurants

One of the most valuable academic exercises a social scientist can engage in is studying another culture. In London, it was fascinating to see the differences in the way restaurants operated. In the United States you sit down at a table, the server takes your order, interacts with you a lot in order to get a big tip, and then subtly tells you that it is time to go by putting the check on the table. Britain is different. Often times there are no servers, you just order at the bar. When there is a server the only thing they do on their own is drop the food off at your table. You have to signal for the check or if you need something. They are not trying to solicit a tip because a service charge is already included in the bill. I gathered observations from 3 restaurants in London and in the US to compile the table below.

	Interactions With Staff	Time Spent in Restaurant	Tip
US	4.7	37 min	15%
UK	2.4	67 min	NONE

Conclusions

According to my professor "the best way to get to know yourself is to live in another country for a couple months." She was right. Living in another country is an extremely valuable experience that everyone should experience at some point in their college careers. Studying the sociology of food would not have been half as interesting without the cross-cultural comparisons that we were able to make. Food is a powerful force in our lives. Even though you don't need to travel halfway across the world to find that out, I would highly recommend doing so.



References

- Guptill, Amy E., Denise A. Copleton, and Betsy Lucal. *Food and Society*. N.p.: n.p., n.d. Print.
- Mennell, Stephen, Anne Murcott, and Anneke Van Otterloo. "Introduction: Significance and theoretical orientations." *Current sociology* 40.2 (1992): 1-19.
- Power, Elaine M. "De-centering the text: exploring the potential for visual methods in the sociology of food." *Journal for the Study of Food and Society* 6.2 (2003): 9-20.
- Bäckström, Anna, A-M. Pirttilä-Backman, and Hely Tuorila. "Dimensions of novelty: a social representation approach to new foods." *Appetite* 40.3 (2003): 299-307.
- Ward, Paul, John Coveney, and Julie Henderson. "Editorial: A sociology of food and eating." *Journal of Sociology* 46.4 (2010): 347-351.