***Research paper, Practices and the Practical Dimension in the Study of Social Life, Copenhagen 9. -11. juni, 2018, Learning and Education***

Cooking and leaning

By Boris Andersen

I would like to address the following topics in my introduction to the summer school discussion : 1 The overall research issues in my work, 2. A review of selected main points from my PhD thesis, “*What motivates adolescents to cook, and how is their cooking practice situated in their everyday life” (Andersen 2016),*and 3. The current issue I work with; criticism of the concept of food agency used for increasing cooking, and introduction of the concept of "foodscapes" as a learning site (context) for learning initiatives related to cooking and eating.

***1. The overall issues for my research***

The background for my research in learning processes and cooking is my evaluation of a Danish cooking project, where students aged 18-20 were offered an evening during which they were shown various types of food preparation with an emphasis on frying technique, and were afterwards given the opportunity to prepare some different dishes and eat together.

Following this evaluation, the question arose as to what actually motivates young people to cook. The obvious answer might be Hunger. However, , this could strictly speaking be satisfied by buying fast food or making a sandwich, which many of them actually did. For some, but not all, cooking was an activity filled with pleasure, and not just a chore that needed to be overcome. Why this difference? It became the starting point of my interest in young people and their cooking.

There was great interest in my research project. The words "young" and "cook" proved almost as a passphrase for the interest. Not least in view of a concern for the health of young people, with the assumption that there is a strong direct correlation between "cooking competency", "making meals from scratch” and "eating in accordance with official dietary recommendations .

*The cooking research with relevance for public health*

The food and meal sociological research field has, for at least the last 20 years, been dominated by research, that was supposed to devise methods that could stem the global "obesity epidemic".

With a clear global tendency indicating that the less educated and socially exposed groups have the highest risk of health problems which result from unhealthy eating. Seen from a socio-economic perspective, rationale that curbs the “obesity epidemic” within industrialized societies will be able to decrease the financials cost of diseases connected to obesity, such as diabetes, and various types of cardiovascular diseases. Considered in a non-economic perspective, the goal can be formulated as a political-ideological motivated desire to provide the best conditions so all citizens can live a long and life with hardly any diseases.

But the transmission based thesis abut a strong direct correlation between "cooking competency", "making meals from scratch at home” and "to eat healthy” seems difficult to verify through empirical studies.

Back in 2001, Tim Lang & Martin Caraher - in a now classical article in the field, *”Is there a culinary skills transition”* (Lang, 2001), concluded that: “*There is currently no literature available on evidence for the effectiveness of cooking skills in the influence choice of healthy foods or of healthy cooking techniques”* (ibid.).

A later international based literature based study (Chenhall, 2010) pointing in the same direction:

*“In terms of the implications of a change of a change or transition, information is limited to substantiate a direct relationship between cooking and food preparation skills and health* (Chenhall 2010: 3)*”.* Further:

*“In terms of the suggested ”transition”, limited national and international quantifiable and generalizable data exists to conform the state of, and changes to, cooking and food preparation skills within populations, children and families”* (ibid.: 2).

A recently completed current literature-based study also points to the lack of transition. In this study the focus has been on the correlation between home economic teaching in primary school and changes in dietary habits (Larsen, 2018)

It must be stressed that the difficulties in finding solid empirical evidence that a transition takes place, doesn’t exclude that it actually happens. Firstly, because the requirement for "quantifiable and generalizable data" perhaps results in overlooking effects. This is possibly due because analysis and interpretion of this type is not employed in a quantitative survey design. Secondly, it may be that initiatives launched today would only show up as a change in practice in a long-term perspective. Such a perspectives would require more longitidualle design studies. Which again would raise other methodological problems.

But it may also be a possibility, that the lack of empirically solid findings, means that

the “transmission based thesis” about a strong direct correlation between "cooking competency", "making meals from scratch at home” and "healthy eating”, is not viable. Or, less categorically, at least deserves to be nuanced through further empirical based research.

This became the starting point for my research on cooking- and food practices among adolescents.

***2. My PhD: What motivates adolescents to cook, and how is their cooking practice situated in their evaryday life” (Andersen 2016)***

The overall aim in my PhD-dissertation has been – in a practice theoretical research perspective - to investigate what motivates adolescents to cook and prepare food and how their cooking practice is situated in their everyday life*.*

Followed by five research questions:

1. What do adolescents eat throughout their day?
2. How do they prepare their food?
3. How does their sense of what it takes to prepare food and get through a meal affect their cooking practice?
4. How do other doings and meal activities affect their dinner practice?
5. How is it possible to motivate adolescents - who do not like to cook- to cook?

The research design combines video-based observational research of adolescents cooking, and individual interviews, in an overall qualitative and explorative perspective. The research took place amongst 16 residents of a Danish dormitory, sharing amongst themselves two kitchens. The data includes transcriptions of the 2.5 hours of interview with each of the participants (spread over two days), 15 hours of web-cam based video from the kitchens (spread over two days, 4 hours each film), as well as a minor number of recordings of meal preparations.

My work with practice theory rests on a comparative systematic reading of the contribution from respectively, and primarily, Theodor Schatzki (1996, 2001), Andreas Reckwitz (2002), Allen Warde (2005) and Bente Halkier (2008, 2010), as well as, to a lesser extent, also Elisabeth Shove & Mika Pantzar (2005, 2012) and Ehn & Löfgren (2009).

Using a practice-theoretical research perspective on the adolescent’scooking-practice implied two things: First, that their cooking practice would be researched as part of its actual performance (not entity). Second, that it would be seen as a part of the flow of other every day-life activities.

The dissertation includes a detailed exemplified review of the analytical approach, which was applied to the data consistently. It combines the use of the main analytical tools associated with practice theory, a. understandings, b. procedures and c. engagements, with elements from the phenomenological interpretative tradition (Giorgi, 1975).

*My conclusions*

My overall conclusion, answering the question “What motivates adolescents to cook” is: It is the possibility of cooking with or for other people that motivates adolescents to cook, and, by this, also makes different types of cooking practices.

If they are only preparing food for themselves, it has to be quick and easy, while they willingly spend time and experiment with recipes when the results are shared with others. In the terms of the practice theory perspective, in which the adolescent’s cooking practices have been analyzed and interpreted: the cooking practices of adolescents primarily seem to be coordinated by the engagement (teleoafftektive structures), while the understandings (knowledge/know how) and procedures (written and unwritten rules) play a secondary role.

Secondly, my interest in the adolescent’s cooking practice as part of the flow of their, everyday lives, also made it relevant to introduce some additional findings, which I have summarized in the following:

1. The longing for routines; cooking as a source that structures everyday life (Andersen, 2015. pp. 154-155),
2. When society’s norms for eating-rhythms clash with the individuals; i.e. in a situation of “lack of breakfast hunger” (ibid. pp. 80-82),
3. Hot canteen food as a potential factor in the decline of domestic cooking (ibid. pp. 82-84)
4. Healthy eating; a tendency of male voluntary-disclaimers in regard to own health (ibid. pp. 159-162)
5. Food at the Television(while watching?); “Looking, not Making” (ibid. pp. 150-151)

And, with reference to two included detailed video-based cases;

* that the lack of understanding of procedure and know-how can have an impact on how long the workflow takes – and can result in a larger food waste,
* that the lack of understanding of the procedure and the lack of know-how can mean that young people refrain from buying certain victuals,
* that the lack of equipment management can mean that they reject going for the optimized results,
* routines without understanding (checking whether the oil is hot or not, just because she has seen someone else doing it), but it doesn’t have any consequences.

Based on my findings I attempt to recommend how to support and strengthen the adolescent’s willingness to cook. This was mainly focused on creating better – and more inspiring – facilities for collective cooking and facilitating meal- and cooking communities at dormitories.

My ideas for further research are summarized as an interest in:

1. A deeper understanding of the connection between current meal practices, childhood meal routines, and the impacts of teaching cooking initiatives.
2. Research to follow up on initiatives aiming at supporting adolescents desire to prepare food, and by this, strengthening my thesis about the ability of meal communities to motivate cooking practices (Some projects have meanwhile been launched).

The theoretical and methodological reflections of my dissertation were mainly concerned with the problems regarding:

1. How is a practice delimited
2. How does practice theory handle the possible interaction (the social) between people when they perform?

***Discussion for the summer school***

In the time after I wrote my Ph.D.-thesis I have become increasingly interested in issues of more learning theoretical character: They are primarily based on a critique of the concept of "food agency", with a central reference to a definition made by Trubek et. al. in Appetite:

*”Food agency” , considers how the actor (read: home cook) completing the work employs manual and cognitive skills as well as sensorial perceptions, while also navigating and shaping various societal structures (e.g., time, money, mobility, etc.) in the course of setting and meeting personal meal preparation goals. Thus to have “food agency” is to be empowered to act throughout the course of planning and preparing meals within a particular food environment. Such moves, from aspiration to action, are particularly important in the contemporary American context, where it is increasingly feasible to choose not to cook and still bed fed”* (ibid.: 298).

My ongoing critical analysis of this food agency concept - understood as the combination of individual based motivation and competence – is based on the assumption that the individual-based (cognitive/psychological) learning perspective, as the concept of "food agency" fundamentally rests on, should not be left alone if it is to serve as an inspiration to the pedagogical and didactic interventions designed to promote cooking.

My work is inspired by some of my own key conclusions from my thesis. The claim that:

1. different cooking practices are closely connected to the situations where they are performed, depending on whether or not there is someone to cook with or share the prepared meal
2. learning about cooking ideally should take places as a community of practice as part of the solution of an everyday problem, and
3. that presence physically in a room where cooking is practiced can influence subsequent own cooking practice

Because of these conclusions I am now working on conceptualizing more ecologically based learning understandings than the food agency concept leads to. This is based on the tradition on social anthropology (Wenger/Lave), pragmatism (Dewey/Heidegger) and the practical theoretically inspired perspective on learning and change processes (Higgs, 2012).

Another integrated element in my actual work included the question of whether it would be possible – and desirable – to designate some particular, typical characteristics of the learning environment we find ourselves in when food – understood as materiality – is part of a practice, i.e. “cooking education” “cooking at home” and “eating” (alone or together with others (commensality)).

Here I work on the basis of the established concept of ”Foodscape”[[1]](#footnote-1) as being a potentially appropriate research mode in the study of cooking/eating and leaning processes, qua its linkage between "food" and the physical-spatial-visual suffix "scape". I find the concept attractive because it focusses our attention on the fact that interactions with food and meals are always happening in (and should therefore be interpreted in conjunction with) the physical-material context, in which we cook and eat. How are we seated, who are the others, how is the light, the colours, the sounds, the time of day, etc. In other words; cooking and eating cannot simply count as being an inter-subjective and mental phenomenon, but have to be researched as a part of a physical-material context (Andersen, 2015).

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I hope, that the above has provided a sense of what I would like to present as a takeoff for our discussion in the Leaning and Education group at the Summer school

Best

Boris

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1. It should be emphasized that the concept of Foodscapes is far from unequivocally applied by the different researchers who use it in their investigation of the interaction between food and people: The following examples include some of the differences:

   * Foodscape is the *physical context* in which food choices are made (Burgoine 2009)
   * We employ the term Foodscape to describe a *social construction* that captures and constitutes cultural ideals of how food relates to specific places, people and food systems (Johnston 2009)
   * Foodscapes represent the view of a particular food object, as seen in the total sum appearance of the *food’s visual features* (Sobal 2007)
   * Foodscape is the *multiplicity of sites where food is displayed* for purchase, and where it may also be consumed. (Winston 2004).
   * Foodscapes are *processes*, where elements relate to each other and generate relationships and affect. (Brembæk 2010, inspired by the thought of Deleuze)
   * Foodscapes are *cultural, economic, historical, personal, political, or social landscapes that, in one way or another, are about food* (Adema 2007).

   As this shows, different uses of the concept Foodscape are brought into play: Some scholars understand it as a "processes of signification", while others understand it as “products of signification”, some see it as pure "materiality", while others see it as "social constructs ".

   [↑](#footnote-ref-1)