

Food, Ethnicity, Identity

1. Recall: Semiotics and social significance (See the "Food and Social Meaning" handout.)

We use objects, our bodies, our clothing, our children to convey messages all the time. *Symbolic significance* is a matter of what is expressed based on the conventions, “codes,” social meanings, in the context. Not everything conveys meanings, and not all meanings are easily recognized. And they are not fixed or stable: they can be contested, changed, etc. *Semiotics* is the study of such symbolic meanings. The *material significance* of a code concerns the social framework that gives rise to it and the consequences it has for that social framework.

The preparation and consumption of food provides, moreover, a material means for expressing the more abstract significance of social systems and cultural values. It may be argued that what people are prepared to take inside their bodies reflects their social identities, and their membership of social groups. To view eating habits as a matter of culture is to understand that they are a product of codes of conduct and the structure of social relationships of the society in which they occur. (Murcott 1982, 204)

2. Social groups and social boundaries

Social frameworks help define social groups and subgroups along lines of:

Ethnicity

Religion

Geographical Region, including north/south, coastal/central, urban/rural

Class, wealth

Education, occupation

Gender

“...in order for ethnic [and other!] groups to perpetuate themselves when in contact with other groups they not only need “signals for identification, but also a structuring of interaction which allows the persistence of cultural differences.” (Kalcik quoting Barthes, 45)

“Abner Cohen...defines the central theoretical problem of cultural anthropology as the dialectical relationship between symbolic action and power relationships...” (Kalcik, 45)

“One of the most important functions for such symbols is the “objectification” of relationships between individuals and groups. Social relationships are developed and maintained by symbols, and thus we tend to *see* groups through their symbols and to identify ourselves through symbols.” (Kalcik, 45)

“Mary Douglas tells us that “if food is treated as a code, the message it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed. The message is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across the boundaries....Food categories therefore encode social events.” This is true because of the relationship between a system such as foodways and other ordered systems associated with it in the culture.” (Kalcik 47, quoting Douglas)

“Hortense Powdermaker suggests similar ideas about the relationship between food and group: “The communal eating of food and customs concerning it may be said to have a double function: (1) to maintain the cohesion of the society and of groups within it; (2) to determine, in part, the relation of the individual to the society and to the smaller groups within it.”” (Kalcik, quoting Powdermaker)

“As Molly Schuchat says of ethnic groups in the United States, “it can be seen that food style is not based on geography and/or economics alone, but becomes a means of self-identity as well as a group membership card. In other words, people tend to eat as they would like to be perceived, so that it is as much a matter of ‘you eat what you wish to be’ as of ‘you are what you eat.’” (Kalcik quoting Schuchat, 54)

Murcott, Anne. "The Cultural Significance of Food and Eating." *Proceedings for the Nutrition Society* 41, no. 2 (June 1982): 203-10.

© Cambridge University Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <http://ocw.mit.edu/fairuse>.

Kalcik, Susan. "Ethnic Foodways in America: Symbol and the Performance of Identity." In *Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the United States: The Performance of Group Identity*. Edited by Linda Keller Brown and Kay Mussell. University of Tennessee Press, 1984.

© University of Tennessee Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <http://ocw.mit.edu/fairuse>.

3) American Thanksgiving

A Traditional Thanksgiving¹

The star of this meal is the Brined Maple Turkey with Cream Gravy. And, in addition to sausage stuffing, mashed potatoes, carrots, and Brussels sprouts, there are two decadent desserts: Pecan and Date Pie and Pumpkin Cake with Cream Cheese Glaze. Don't worry about making up your mind which is better—just make them both!

¹ <http://www.myrecipes.com/holidays-and-occasions/thanksgiving-recipes/traditional-thanksgiving-menus-10000001852956/>

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

24.03 Good Food: The Ethics and Politics of Food Choices
Fall 2012

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.