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Perceptions of Brazilian young adults about cooking

Percepções de adultos jovens brasileiros sobre o ato de cozinhar

Abstract

Introduction. Cooking at home is conducive to better diet quality and can help improve health. Nevertheless, the reduced transmission of culinary knowledge and skills worldwide hinders young adults' confidence and autonomy to prepare meals. To inform the development of initiatives that support young adults to overcome barriers to cook and improve their diet quality, it is important to investigate the process of culinary socialization in the context of their own life course. **Objective.** This qualitative study aimed to explore how young adults who cook perceive their involvement with this practice and to identify which culinary socializing agents were part of their learning process. **Method.** Open interviews based on the life-course perspective approach were conducted with male and female Brazilian young adults aged 19-24 years-old and thematically analysed. **Results.** Perceptions about cooking and about learning how to cook led to the creation of six themes: (1) "Caring about myself"; (2) "(Un)pleasant feelings"; (3) "Promoting conviviality"; (4) "Worrying about outcomes"; (5) "Skills needed"; and (6) "Socializing agents". **Conclusions.** Initiatives to enable young adults overcoming barriers to cook and potentially improve their diet quality need to focus not only on practical cooking skills development, but also on planning. Also important is to foster positive messages involving self-care, pleasure, and conviviality. Ways of using the internet and social media to engage this population to cook more deserves to be further explored.

Keywords: Food preparation. Culinary socialization. Socializing gente. Interview. Internet.

Resumo

Introdução. Cozinhar em casa pode promover uma alimentação mais saudável. Porém, uma possível redução na transmissão de conhecimentos e habilidades culinárias parece prejudicar a confiança e a autonomia dos jovens para preparar as refeições. Para informar o desenvolvimento de iniciativas que apoiem os jovens adultos a superar as barreiras para cozinhar e melhorar a qualidade da dieta, é importante investigar o processo de socialização culinária no contexto de seu próprio curso de vida. **Objetivo.** Este estudo qualitativo teve como objetivo explorar como jovens adultos que têm o hábito de cozinhar percebem seu envolvimento com essa prática e identificar quais agentes socializadores culinários fizeram parte de seu processo de aprendizagem. **Método:** Entrevistas abertas baseadas na abordagem da perspectiva do curso de vida foram realizadas com adultos jovens brasileiros de 19 a 24 anos de ambos os sexos e analisadas tematicamente. **Resultados.** As percepções sobre cozinhar e sobre aprender a cozinhar levaram à criação de seis temas: (1) "Cuidar de mim"; (2) "Sentimentos (des)agradáveis"; (3) "Promover o convívio"; (4) "Preocupação com os resultados"; (5) "Habilidades necessárias"; e (6) "Agentes de socialização". **Conclusões.** As iniciativas para permitir que os adultos jovens superem as barreiras para cozinhar e potencialmente melhorar a qualidade da dieta precisam se concentrar não apenas no desenvolvimento prático de habilidades culinárias, mas também em habilidades, como planejamento. Também é importante fomentar mensagens positivas envolvendo autocuidado, prazer e convívio. Formas de usar a

internet e as mídias sociais para engajar essa população a cozinhar mais merecem ser mais bem exploradas.

Palavras-chave: Preparo de refeições. Socialização culinária. Agentes de socialização. Entrevistas qualitativas. Internet.

INTRODUCTION

Cooking is conducive to the development of personal relationships, to the establishment of stronger cultural identities,¹ as well as may be linked with better health and diet quality.²⁻⁵ Despite needing more visibility in official documents,⁶ many dietary guidelines in different countries encourage the preparation of meals from scratch.⁷⁻¹¹ Cooking meals “from scratch” is encouraged by using unprocessed or minimally processed foods as a base, adding small amounts of processed culinary ingredients (such as salt, fat and sugar) and limited amounts of processed foods. Ultra-processed foods should be avoided.⁸

Today's young adults (19-24 years-old) from industrialized western countries are said to have less skills and knowledge about cooking when compared to previous generations.¹²⁻¹⁴ This led some authors to claim that they are less confident and autonomous in terms of food-related practices.^{15,16}

Young people acquire specific behaviour patterns from their parents, and interaction with other individuals may reinforce or redirect such patterns – this happens throughout the life course and has been conceptualized as the “socialization process”.¹⁷ Socialization represents all learning processes during the life course and is a fundamental influence over behaviours, beliefs and actions.^{18,19}

In the context of this paper, the expression “culinary socialization”²⁰ is employed to describe the process by which subjects acquire, from socializing agents, patterns of practices and perceptions related to cooking. This process includes the personal and social influences to which an individual was and is exposed, and will result in food and culinary choices (e.g., ready-to-eat meals, cooking methods, cost of ingredients, difficulty level).

Culinary socializing agents vary during the life course, and the first influences of learning come from the familiar nucleus. Later, influences on cooking practices may change and new socializing agents appear, such as roommates, partners, cookery books and media.^{1,12,13,21-27} Although research about socialization within the family nucleus is well established, there are still gaps that need to be filled in relation to the influence of other socializing agents.²⁸

Individuals face many barriers to cook. Some are environmental aspects such as offer – accessibility, availability, advertising and discounts for ready-to-eat foods, and lack of facilities or equipment to cook. Others are more personal, including negative feelings and memories, such as feeling forced to cook out of necessity, seeing it as an act of great effort, having previous experiences of failure, in addition to lack of time and lack of skills.²⁹

To inform the development of initiatives that support young adults to overcome barriers to cook and improve their diet quality, it is necessary to explore how they perceive the practice of cooking and how they learn to cook. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the perceptions of young adults who cook on their involvement with this activity and identify which culinary socializing agents were involved in their learning process.

Theoretical framework

Considering that the process of learning how to cook is social by nature and that individuals adapt their acquired practices during the life course, we employed the Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) as theoretical framework.³⁰ SCT is an agentic theory of human behaviour, i.e., founded in the notion that human beings have the capacity to effect change in the course of events partly by their own actions. However, it also depends on their self-efficacy, which refers to the individual's belief that he or she is capable to organize and act to produce change.³¹

METHODS

This qualitative study is part of a wider project aimed at understanding how cooking-related meanings and practices develop and change over the life course and are transmitted between generations.³² Study protocol was approved by institutional ethics committee (Approval number 1.723.746). All participants gave written consent to voluntarily participate in the study. Participants were informed that they could opt out at any time; that there were “no right or wrong answers”; and that their information would be kept strictly confidential and never associated with their names. Report complies with the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) checklist.³³

Participants and recruitment

Participants were actively recruited among the academic community of one university campus and through researchers’ social networks. Purposive Sampling was employed to recruit individuals between 19-24 years old, from both sexes, who lived in the urban area of a capital city in Southern Brazil, and who declared to be home-cooks. We cannot be precise about how many people refused to participate.

Data collection

Sociodemographic data were collected before each interview. After a pilot test, individual face-to-face interviews were conducted at participants’ residences or places of common agreement, between November 2017 and March 2018, by the second or third authors, females, both trained on qualitative data collection. The second author was an undergrad student and the third a PhD candidate, both in Nutrition. All participants were aware that the interviewers were nutritionists and that they were conducting research to understand how people perceive the act of cooking.

As an introduction, participants were asked to recall and briefly describe their life history. After this, the central interview question was posed: *Beginning in childhood and up until the present, going through these different moments of your history, how were cooking and cooking-related activities part of your daily life?* All participants were asked to describe themselves as cooks.

When necessary, participants were prompted to elaborate on what was said, or probed for clarification. Interviews were audio-recorded and lasted on average 46 minutes (23-122 min). Researchers agreed that data saturation was achieved after ten interviews. Data saturation is the point in data collection when no new or relevant information emerges, hence, a researcher looks at this as the point to stop data collection.³⁴ Field notes were taken throughout the process.

Data analysis

Audio recordings were transcribed *verbatim* using a free web app (<https://otranscribe.com/>), generating a manuscript which was thematically analysed following a six-step procedure.³⁵ Firstly, transcripts were approached through repeated and active readings for familiarization with the data. Then raw data (phrases or words) were converted into initial codes which shared similar characteristics. Coding was done and repeated by the second author and then conferred with the third one. Secondly, codes representing the different perceptions of young adults’ involvement with cooking were grouped into key initial themes by the same two researchers. Themes reflected a pattern of shared meaning³⁶ and were reviewed to make sure they were distinct from each other. This process happened through discussions with the research team leader, until achieving consensus. Microsoft Office Excel were used to support the data analysis.

To provide an interpretation grounded in the data, we adopted an inductive/reflexive approach, where coding is an organic and open iterative process, and themes are strongly linked to the data themselves.³⁵ No pre-existing coding frame was adopted.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Participants' characteristics

Participants (n = 10) were all single, seven did not live with their parents, and six were women. Sample was balanced in terms of occupation, as we interviewed full-time students (n = 3), full-time employees (n = 3), and young adults who studied and worked simultaneously (n = 4). Seven participants reported they enjoyed cooking (three men, four women) while three did not enjoy (two women, one man) (Table 1).

Table 1. Participants' sociodemographic characteristics. Florianopolis, SC, Brasil, 2018

Nº	Sex	Age (years)	Occupation	Living situation	Cooks frequently	Likes to cook	Self-description as a cook
1	Female	24	Lawyer and Grad student	Shared flat with friends	No	No	Cooks to control body weight
2	Female	22	Undergrad student	Parents' home	Yes	Yes	Calm, confident, risk-taker, messy
3	Female	22	Undergrad student and trainee	Mother's home	Yes	Yes	Meticulous, cautious, confident, organized
4	Female	24	Undergrad student and trainee	Own home with 5 y.-o. daughter	Yes	Yes	Confident, cooks when feels like it
5	Female	23	Undergrad student	Shared flat with friends	No	No	Always cooks the same recipes, impatient, lazy
6	Male	23	Architect	Sister's home	No	No	Impatient, immediatist, independent, not a good planner
7	Male	22	Undergrad student	Shared flat with friends	No	Yes	Enjoys discovering new flavors, lazy, clumsy, cooks 'with love'
8	Female	23	Journalist	Own home with siblings	Yes	Yes	Confident, calm, happy, organized, conscious, risk taker
9	Male	20	Undergrad student and trainee	Parents' home	Yes	Yes	Confident, happy, likes to innovate, cooks 'everyday food'
10	Male	24	Self employed	Shared flat with friends	No	Yes	'A great instant noodle maker'

Young adults' perceptions about cooking

Thematic analysis led to the organization of codes around six themes regarding perceptions about cooking and cooking-related activities, as well as the culinary socialization agents involved in their lives.

Caring about myself

Knowing which ingredients to include in food preparations and being able to control one's weight were mentioned as reasons for preparing meals *"Cooking was always a way to control the food I eat and keep me that way, take care of myself, you know?"* (woman, 24 years old). Participants mentioned that if they did not cook, they felt as if not taking proper care of their bodies and being careless about the food they ate. They mentioned attempting to cook healthy meals, test recipes shared by nutritionists, as well as searching for and adapting recipes to make them healthier. Thus, health concerns permeated participants' perceptions about cooking. One possible explanation is that, among the broad perceptions people have about healthy eating, one of them is eating fresh, unprocessed or low-processed foods,³⁷ which requires cooking with "as much basic ingredients as possible".²⁴ Similar results are reported by other qualitative studies with adults,^{38,39} and young adults.¹⁴ Our finding has a practical implication, adding to the studies cited, indicating the potential of cooking as a practice of self-care to be valued in health promotion activities.

(Un)pleasant feelings

Participants who did not like to cook reported that every cooking occasion was associated with a negative feeling and not at all with pleasure. One of them said *"Nowadays I cook because I have to, not because I like"* (man, 20 years old). In the words of another participant, *I like cooking when I am in the mood, but I hate the feeling of 'having' to do it* (woman, 24 years old). On the other hand, those who enjoyed cooking referred to missing their home-cooking routines whenever they needed to eat out because of work and study schedules. They mentioned that cooking without time constraints during weekends was a pleasure, and that it allowed them to experiment with different recipes. Participants who liked to cook also reported doing it to relieve stress after a day's work and counterbalance the demands of everyday life *"I'm doing it [cooking], because I want to. All the stress from uni, the kitchen takes away"* (woman, 22 years old). For them, being in the kitchen was an introspective and personal moment which brought a sense of pleasure in deciding what they wanted to eat, even when nobody else was present.

Participants who reported liking to cook did it regularly. This suggests that by acting in a positive feedback manner, those feelings of pleasure about cooking stimulated participants to cultivate this habit, and the opposite happened for those who did not enjoy it. The way people learn to deal with food possibly plays a role in this. Swan et al. found that liking the way a food tastes is important, but memories and emotions surrounding preparation and sharing are just as crucial.³⁹ People who did not have pleasurable food experiences from childhood but built them later on in life got to associate them with positive and pleasurable experiences when "leaving the nest", and became more interested in food as they felt empowered to make their own personal choices.³⁹

The perception of leisure is a motivation for cooking⁴⁰ and it could be perceived as a hobby, or as a source of relaxation and enjoyment even by those who worked full-time and only had a few hours to dedicate to the preparation of food.¹⁶ In order to encourage the habit of cooking, future studies can focus on *how* to foster positive feelings of pleasure about this practice in individuals who do not like to cook.

Promoting conviviality

Participants mentioned that the presence of friends encouraged them to cook and motivated them to prepare meals. Cooking with and for friends was described as a pleasurable activity especially by those who left their homes to attend university, as it allowed them to approach and get to know new people *"I realized that the kitchen is interesting... I think it brings people together"* (woman, 23 years old). Apparently, the social aspect of sharing food gave more meaning to the act of cooking, as some participants who lived alone felt unmotivated and described themselves as "lazy" for not wanting to cook just for themselves. For some people cook together may be more enjoyable, when compared with cooking alone and cooking with and for someone means a joy, a way of showing affection, pleasing others, and entertaining.^{14,23,40-43} Our results confirm the importance of sharing with other people the meal preparation steps to reinforce positive health messages about the social aspect of preparing food, as suggested in the Dietary Guidelines for the Brazilian Population.⁸

Worrying about the outcome

All participants mentioned being concerned about the result of their cooking efforts, but especially those who did not like to cook. They were critical of the food prepared by themselves and mentioned not liking the taste of their own dishes. Therefore, they felt discouraged and were unwilling to cook more often *"I don't know if it's because I don't like (to cook) or because I don't know how to, but it never tastes as good; and that doesn't encourage me at all to keep on"* (man, 23 years old). Participants who liked to cook considered the food prepared by them as appetizing, and when it was shared with family and friends who praised them, they felt even more motivated and confident to take more risks and try new things *"I like to see the result, you know? I like people to enjoy my food... like when I do it and people praise it"* (woman, 22 years old). Possibly, participants' foresight about the food they prepare could encourage or discourage them to cook regularly and to experiment in the kitchen, depending on their enjoyment with this practice.

In fact, there is a regulatory mechanism of human behaviour where actions that bring reward are generally repeated, whereas those that bring unrewarding outcomes tend to be discarded. This self-referent thought is not concerned with the number of skills someone has, but the belief in the capability to act under different circumstances.^{30,31} People with greater self-efficacy in some activities are more confident in it which enables them to have a positive expectation and therefore keep the practice as a habit.^{30,31} One practical implication of our finding is that the way we learn to cook influences our self-efficacy about this practice, so initiatives should seek to equip individuals with strategies or ways to learn how to cope with cooking-related stressful situations in order to improve their confidence and cook more frequently.

Skills needed

Participants reported that by observing other people cook they realized that their skills and knowledge about food preparation could always be improved, and that they would like to have better cooking skills *"I think I lack this intuition thing... following a recipe is ok, but my knowledge about which and how to mix ingredients is quite precarious"* (woman, 23 years old). Also, not having enough knowledge about cooking and meal planning was enough to make them feel less confident in the kitchen and not liking to cook. Some participants expressed having no patience for cooking meals that required more planning and preparation time, saying things like *"I'm not very patient with cooking. I think that's the main issue, because cooking sometimes takes time if it's a more elaborate dish, it has to go from the fridge to the oven... I'm a very immediate person too, I don't like... I can't plan what I'm going to eat at night like 'ah I'm going to defrost something to cook later', it's more about what I feel like eating at the time I start cooking... this also prevents me from preparing more elaborate dishes as I would have to start earlier in the afternoon"* (man, 23 years old).

Other participants, especially the ones who liked to cook, felt more confident to cook more complex meals even for festive occasions; they were more easy-going, and described cooking as something that came naturally to them.

The urge to get better by comparing oneself with others has to do with the social nature of learning to cook. By observing others, we acquire not only knowledge and skills, but also attitudes and emotional propensities to perform a task.³⁰ In fact, when individuals are exposed to food preparation situations and have space to practice what they have learned they gain more confidence and develop their cooking skills.⁴⁴ This willingness to improve one's cooking skills is highly desirable in the context of health promotion, as those with greater self-efficacy in cooking tend to cook more from basic or raw ingredients and enjoy doing so.²⁴ Lack of confidence in cooking skills has also been described as a barrier to food preparation by other researchers .

Some authors argue that individuals who are more involved in meal preparation are able to make the thinking about cooking and organizing meal preparation a part of their daily lives.²⁰ People with greater self-efficacy regarding cooking attribute this to earlier visual and experiential learning opportunities such as "seeing" and "doing".²⁴ In fact, previous studies found that young adults are often active, networking, learning and improving their skills²³ as well as they desire to have models in food preparation and to be experienced in cooking.¹⁴ We suggest that initiatives to enable young adults to overcome barriers to cook tackle not only practical and mechanical skills, but also cognitive skills such as meal planning and time management.

Socializing agents

Results revealed that the main socialization agents involved in the participants' cooking experiences were mothers (mentioned by all participants), followed by friends and the internet. Participants described their cooking experiences with their mothers and mentioned the importance of shared moments in the kitchen. Different interactions were reported – some participants described being helped by their mothers, while others reported asking their mothers for assistance while they did the bulk of the work. Participants mentioned that when they had doubts about specific recipes their mothers explained how to prepare it *"Today I felt like eating something different and thought about cooking pasta with sauce... then I asked myself, 'how do I cook pasta? I have no idea', so I called my mom and she explained to me"* (woman, 22 years old). Mothers were recognized as recipients of family recipes transmitted between generations, and as the ones responsible for maintaining family tradition. Participants mentioned fond memories of being engaged in other activities in the kitchen while their mothers prepared family meals *"So, at night, I used to watch her [mother] preparing a meal for the next day while I was there in the kitchen doing my homework"* (woman, 23 years old). Studies in western urban countries identified the mother and the family nucleus as the main agent of culinary socialization.^{12,21-24,26,41} Despite cultural changes in the discourse of food preparation as a task primarily undertaken by women, cooking at home is still strongly determined by gender.⁴⁵ A study which interviewed northern Brazilian women identified that, after having children, women began to modify their cooking and eating practices and incorporated ideals of motherhood and incorporate social responsibilities of mothers, wives, and housewives.⁴⁶

Culinary socialization by friends and housemates was reported as frequently as with mothers. Therefore, although mothers are recognized as important culinary socializing agents, friends and other companions influence the learning process just as well. Participants mentioned learning how to cook specific dishes with friends and having informal cooking classes with them *"Everybody went to the kitchen, one friend chopped onions, another diced the meat and everybody did it together"* (woman, 23 years old). Some participants reported being the one in charge, giving instructions and controlling what was being prepared while others said they only helped and liked to observe.

Learning through socialization is an ongoing process in life.^{17,19} Indeed, regarding cooking, people find their own way and transform what they have learned from home according to their own paths and people they interact

with.^{23,27,32} Mainly throughout the period of young adulthood, parents have a less prominent role, as individuals experiment individualization and new socializing agents have a stronger influence.²⁸ Other researchers found similar results – colleagues and friends act as culinary socializing agents as they cook and eat together,⁴⁷ as they serve as role models and support in the kitchen while sharing food shopping and cooking,¹³ and also by introducing new foods.³⁹

All participants mentioned the internet as an important tool to learn how to cook. The main sources mentioned by the participants were YouTube® cooking channels, Facebook® recipes pages, chefs' profiles on Instagram® and Google® search tool. Participants reported learning how to prepare new dishes, searching for specific recipes to use ingredients already available at home, or getting inspiration for creating and adapting dishes. Participants also mentioned searching for videos to visualize the preparation process and the resulting dish – *"I think it's great because you can see it, it's much better than in the written recipe... you can make mistakes in the preparation, not only with the ingredients. The cooking methods are the worst for me... I think YouTube made this a lot easier, so I really like to see recipes there"* (woman, 22 years old). Following Instagram® profiles of chefs was considered inspiring, but TV cooking shows were regarded as a thing of the past. The internet was also regarded as a source for healthy eating tips, healthy recipes, and ways to add specific ingredients into preparations.

Regarding the internet as a socializing agent, two important aspects deserve to be highlighted within the perception of participants: the visualization of the process and result; and that whenever help was needed, other socializing agents were requested. Results show that the social aspect of learning to cook is relevant to promote this practice, and that personal and virtual socializing agents are not excluding, but complementary. This influential role of the internet as a socializing agent shows a change in the cooking knowledge transmission. It is possible to explain this phenomenon by a characteristic of the age group of the participants. Participants belong to generations X and Y, and therefore marked by the explosion of internet use and its presence at all times of their lives.⁴⁸ In Brazil, 88% of the population between 15 and 24 years old have access to the internet, either by computer or smartphones.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, ways of properly using the internet and social media to engage this population in cooking deserve to be further explored.

Strengths and Weaknesses

Qualitative research emphasizes an in-depth and context specific understanding of phenomena, and such goals are well-suited to small sample sizes.³⁴ Therefore, the common patterns on young adults' perceptions within this paper should not be generalized as assertions about large populations. We did not collect data on income, which is a limitation to be recognized, as it could affect participants' perceptions. In spite of that, participants in our sample were diverse in terms of cooking frequency and enjoyment, sex, and living situation. The qualitative approach is subject to the interpretation of the data according to researcher's disciplinary background and training.⁵⁰ In order to minimize the likelihood of biased interpretation, we adopted a reflexive approach of thematic analysis and three trained and experienced researchers were involved in the process through constant discussions.

A strength of the study was the use of open interviews, giving the researcher more freedom of choice in terms of questions' format and wording, and therefore, depth in findings. Another strong point was the use of the life course interview to explore the individuals' culinary socialization, a process highly embedded in routine activities and, therefore, not so easily perceived.⁵¹ An additional strength is that we interviewed a sample composed of mixed occupations, differing from previous research with young adults which focused on university students from developed countries.^{12,13,22,23}

CONCLUSIONS

Results from this qualitative investigation show that young adults' perceptions about cooking involve aspects of self-care, pleasure, conviviality, outcomes, and skills. Mothers and friends were equally mentioned as socializing agents, with the internet being the third. Those who did not like to cook albeit having to regarded it as an obligation, did not feel confident, lacked skills, and did not enjoy their own cooking. Initiatives to enable young adults overcoming barriers to cook and potentially improve their diet quality need to focus not only on practical cooking skills development, but also on planning and time management. Also important to improve young adults' self-efficacy in cooking, is to foster positive messages involving self-care, pleasure, and conviviality. Besides mothers, culinary socializing agents such as friends and the internet may be the key to improve not only young adult's cooking skills, but also their beliefs and actions. Ways of using the internet and social media to engage this population in cooking more deserve to be further explored in future research.

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Mazzonetto AC and Fiates GMR participated in the conceptualization and supervision; Mazzonetto AC, Fiates GMR and Dean M participated in the methodology; Mazzonetto AC; Fiates GMR, Le Bourlegat IS and Camargo AM; participated in the formal analysis; Mazzonett AC and Le Bourlegat IS participated in the investigation; Mazzonetto, AC, Le Bourlegat IS and Camargo AM participated in the writing-original draft preparation; Camargo AM and Fiates GMR participated in writing-review and editing

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