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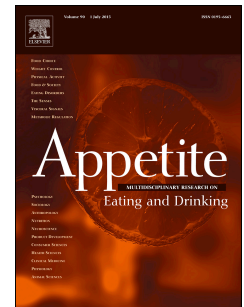
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Living alone but eating together: exploring lunch clubs as a dining out experience

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1 **Living alone but eating together: exploring lunch clubs as a dining out experience** □

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4 *Key messages*

- 5 • Lunch clubs can be sources of dining out experiences
- 6 • Dining in alone is not necessarily experienced as lonely by older people; rather
- 7 associated with a sense of control over menu and food practices
- 8 • However, choice and control is limited by the availability of community care

9 *Abstract* □

10 Dining out is most often associated with pleasure and gratification, principally since it
 11 presents opportunities for sociability. However, access to dining out experiences is
 12 influenced by multiple factors, including age. Little is known about the dining out habits
 13 of older people. In particular, the food practices of those living alone in the community is
 14 under-researched compared to those in hospital or residential care. This study explores
 15 the perceptions and preferences of ten older people towards domestic and communal
 16 meals in South East Scotland. Qualitative data were generated from 5-day food diaries
 17 and in-depth interviews with individuals who lived alone and attended a community-
 18 based senior citizen's lunch club. Data were coded and thematically analysed using a
 19 symbolic interactionist perspective. A number of key themes were identified, including
 20 □the meaning of mealtimes. It was found that most participants ate the majority of their
 21 meals at home alone. Despite this, dining alone was not necessarily experienced as
 22 'lonely'. Participants reported that dining out at the lunch club was a pleasurable
 23 experience given the social □interaction and the separation of consumption from food
 24 work. Moreover, due to restricted mobility and limited access to transport, the lunch club
 25 was viewed by participants as one of □the few places that they could go to dine out. □

26

27 **Introduction** □

28 Mealtimes are not natural, inevitable or universal events and may therefore be highly
 29 indicative of social order (Murcott, 1997; Germov & Williams, 2004). What we eat,
 30 when we eat and where we eat are not determined at birth but are socially constructed and
 31 therefore fluid (Lane et al., 2014). Activities involving food are often marked by
 32 elements of ritual and routine (Logan et al., 2013). When such activities are observed and
 33 analysed, they can highlight important mechanisms by which we relate to ourselves, and
 34 to other people (Warde & Hetherington 1994). □

35 Yet research into the patterning of mealtimes has so far focused on the archetypal
 36 'family' of a heterosexual couple and children (Charles & Kerr, 1988; Ochs & Shohet,
 37 2006; Philpin et al., 2014), and cohabitating couples (Burke et al., 1999; Marshall &
 38 Anderson 2002), despite a rapid expansion of one-person households in the UK since
 39 2004 (Knipe, 2015). Given such socio-demographic shifts, developing an understanding
 40 of domestic mealtime routines and dining out experiences of people living in one-person
 41 households can be considered of increasing importance. □

42 Relatively little is known about the domestic organisation and mealtime experiences of
 43 older people living alone in the community. Living alone in older age is linked with a
 44 reduced motivation to cook and to eat regular meals (Davis, 1985). Older men living
 45 alone consume fewer fruit and vegetables compared with older women (Hughes et al.
 46 2004). Those who live alone over the age of 60 who report feelings of loneliness are also
 47 more likely to forget to eat, and experience a lack of appetite (Wylie, 2000). Older age
 48 represents an important stage of the life course from which to analyse processes of
 49 change, including food practices (Hockey & James, 2002). Widowhood in older age may
 50 prompt changes in domestic habits as individuals' employ social resources to cope with
 51 the psychical challenges of food tasks (Vesnaver et al., 2012). Arguably, the attitudes of
 52 older people represent a much needed contribution to the development of theories of food
 53 consumption and dining out. □

54 The purpose of this study was to explore the food practices of one-person households of
 55 older people, living alone in their own homes. Moreover, the project aimed to

investigate the ways such practices were meaningful; in particular how they related to community care at a conceptual, as well as practical, level. The aims were articulated in the following questions: i) what are the everyday food practices of older people living alone in South East Scotland? (ii) what can their experiences of food practices tell us about identity, relationships with others and society? And (iii) how does the current system of community care in Scotland respond to the meanings of mealtimes held by older people? This paper begins with a synthesis of literature on food behaviours of older people and an overview of community food initiatives in Scotland. Following an outline of the research methods, the results are presented in parallel with a discussion, in order to contextualise findings. Implications for future research as well as policy and practice are identified in the conclusion. □

Background □

Growth in the number of households in Scotland is largely attributed to greater numbers of people, in particular, older people, living alone (National Records of Scotland, 2016). This trend is likely to continue, with a projected 85% increase in the size of the population aged 75 and above between 2016 and 2037 (*ibid*). How food is obtained and prepared is critical to the food security of this population, defined as having access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life at all times (World Health Organisation, 1996). However, at present the Scottish Government recognises that there is ‘no collated data for food provision of older people living in their own homes in Scotland’ (in Jones et al., 2009: 38). A number of factors influence food availability for older people living at home. Although not all older people find it difficult to procure and prepare food, certain factors such as lacking cooking skills, difficulties in accessing shops, not owning a car, disability, and low household income are associated with an increased risk of malnutrition (Community Food and Health Scotland, 2014; Turrini et al., 2010; Wilson, 2009). □

A range of initiatives exist across Scotland with the objective of improving the nutritional status of older people living at home, including lunch clubs, food cooperatives, transport

provision, meal delivery services and cooking classes (Community Food and Health Scotland, 2014). Community initiatives have been shown to be in a unique position to provide a personalised, health-promoting service to older people living at home (Dwyer & Irene, 2011). Keller et al. (2007) demonstrate the benefits of grocery shopping and home-delivery services such as ‘meals-on-wheels’, and argue that adequate funding, appropriate eligibility criteria, and proper co-ordination of these services are critical to ensuring the food security of older people. Without such measures, food security may actually be undermined by policies enabling people to live independently for longer (Mattsson Sydner & Fjellström, 2007). Similarly, Wilson (2009) describes how many older people living in the community rely on services to ensure an appropriate quantity and variety of foodstuffs. In light of this critical contribution, it appears that local authorities are expected to identify need in the community and respond by funding the community initiative that best meets that need in Scotland. □

Longitudinal data indicates that loneliness increases in older age due to reduced friendship networks, bereavement and declining health (Collins, 2014). It is difficult to precisely identify the number of older people who are lonely but estimates suggest that around 10% of those over 65 describe themselves as feeling mostly or always lonely (Victor et al., 2008; Luanaigh & Lawlow, 2008). In Scotland, this equates to 83,000 adults, with many more fitting into the category of ‘at risk’ of loneliness. If the prevalence of loneliness amongst older adults persists, this figure will increase to a population of 100,000 by 2031 (Scottish Executive, 2007). Lunch clubs for older people offer a platform for social interaction with other diners, cooks and those providing service or transport (Dwyer and Hardill, 2011). The Community Food and Health Scotland defines lunch clubs as ‘the opportunity to have a meal, often an affordably priced, outside of the home and ... to meet with others in a social setting’ (2011: 02). Lunch clubs for older people may be an important aspect of combating loneliness in the community, yet data on effectiveness of day care interventions is patchy (Jones et al., 2009).

Research suggests that ageing prompts positive and negative consequences on health and wellbeing through changes in food habits. A loss of control over food activities is hypothesised to threaten identity and cause anxious self-reflection and reduced self-

esteem (Locher et al., 2005; Rose & Howard, 2014). Having to take up new food related activities, as well as having to discontinue former activities, may prompt instability in a sense of self (Gustafsson & Sidenvall, 2002; Atta-Konadu et al., 2011). On the other hand, others have highlighted the capacity of older people to adapt and enjoy new forms of food practices: for example, spending time on other leisure activities than meal preparation (Lane et al., 2014) being cooked for (Wilson, 1997) and dining together (Keller et al., 2007). This contradictory relationship between altered food practices and wellbeing reinstates that there is no singular trajectory of how older people adapt to changes over the life course. □

Given its symbolic nature, anthropologists have long been intrigued by the distribution of and practices around food. Mealtimes have been interpreted as an indication of social affinity (Douglas and Nicod, 1974), gender roles (Douglas, 2014), and the reproduction of family (DeVault, 1991). An understanding of what constitutes a ‘proper’ meal Murcott (1982), whilst often stereotyped, nonetheless has useful currency for comparison (Warde and Martens, 2000). Charles and Kerr (1988) delineate between the sociability of mealtimes in comparison with snacking, which is an individual activity. This raises the issue that an individual’s involvement with food extends beyond prototypical household routine (Murcott, 1997). ‘Food practices’ is a term used to categorize *any* task, action or life experience involving food (Plastow et al., 2015). Such a term encompasses the acquisition, preparation, serving, consuming and disposal of food (Jastran et al., 2009). □

Dining out or eating out is a contested term, most often pitted against ideals of family and household food provision (Wood, 1995). A shared understanding of dining out draws on concepts of non-domestic space, freedom from food work, commerciality, relative rarity and the purposiveness to consume a meal (Warde and Martens, 2000). Theoretical modelling of dining out separates commercial and communal modes of provision. The former characterised by financial transactions (e.g. restaurants and other catering settings) and the latter by more informal system of reciprocity, (e.g. dinner parties and other entertaining events). Survey data suggests that approximately one third of the average weekly food and drink budgets is spent on dining out per British household (DEFRA, 2015). The frequency of dining out appears to vary significantly with age, with older

women eating out less often than younger women (Lyon et al., 2011). Dining out therefore represents a small, but nonetheless important, component of everyday food practices of older people in the UK. Previous analyses of dining out have relied on a commercial: communal dichotomy (Bourdieu, 1984; Bell & Valentine, 1997; Warde, 1997; Warde and Martens, 2000). Whilst these provide interesting insights into the patterning and social significance of dining out, they fail to capture the growing number of alternative spaces, in which meals are shared between non-family members involving less formal economic transactions. Part commercial, part communal, lunch clubs are arguably a burgeoning mode of dining out which have hitherto received little attention.

Methods

A qualitative approach was selected as the most appropriate design to interpret individuals' understanding of the world. A range of methods were chosen to collect data, including interviews and documentary evidence, to capture meanings mediated through language and action. This approach was intended to provide a number of data sources from which variation within and between data sources could be used to identify emerging patterns in the data (Boyatzis, 1998).

Sample

Several lunch clubs specifically for older people were identified using an online third-sector database, the first of whom contacted consented to participate. Ethical protocols were devised in accordance with the University of Stirling Ethics committee and consenting organisation. Research participants were recruited in-person following a short presentation about the project by the researcher. Information leaflets were given out in order that members could consider their involvement in the project, and notes of interest were gathered a week later. Prior to interview, a consent form was used to agree principles of confidentiality, anonymity and to withdraw their involvement between researcher and participant.

Selection criteria were used to implement a sampling frame, guided by the research

questions and conceptual framework (Blaikie, 2009). The term ‘older people’ was acknowledged as a socially constructed category within a constructivist epistemological paradigm; nevertheless, individuals over the age of 65 were classified as older adults in keeping the National Records of Scotland (2016). The criteria for participants in this study were being over the age of 65, attending a lunch club and living alone. Opportunistic sampling of 20 lunch club members resulted in a final sample of ten: five men and five women. All but one interested participant met the criteria for inclusion. This latter case of an individual of the age of 60 was included since disconfirming and ‘exceptional’ cases can enrich samples by locating extremes and contingencies (Miles et al., 2013). Participants ranged between 60 and 88 years old, and had been referred to the lunch club by social workers, family or friends or had self-referred.

Data collection

Three methods were used to collect data: food diaries, a semi-structured interview and a card sort exercise. Two members of the lunch club reviewed the participant materials and interview guide prior to use. Thereafter the researcher visited the lunch club weekly to conduct face-to-face semi-structured interviews to enable issues arising from the diary data to be explored in greater depth. In the week leading up to interview, participants were also asked to complete a 5-day food diary, analogous to Marshall and Anderson (2002) study of the food practices of younger adults. Food diaries were structured for participants’ to record what was eaten, where it was eaten, at what time, with whom and whether anyone else was involved with preparation.

Interviews were active, conversational and followed a loose three-part topic guide, informed by Plastow et al. (2015). Specifically they consisted of:

- a) Introductory questions about the interviewees’ family life, living circumstances and engagement with the lunch club.
- b) Participant reflections on the food diary. Participants responded to the open questions of “Tell me about your food diary” and, “Is there anything that surprised you?”

c) Interviewer reflections on diary and interview content. The interviewer drew on issues raised by the interviewee and food diary to probe specific food behaviours, their typicality and meanings associated with these behaviours.

Verbal prompts were used to locate conversations about food in the home and provide a sensory background for recalling mealtime experiences at home (Taylor, 2005). At the end of the interview, participants were asked to rank statements based on Social Care Institute for Excellence guidance on food and eating in reference to the question, 'how important are these to you as part of an everyday meal?' (see Table 1).

Table 1: SCIE statements based on 'Dignity in Care' guidelines (SCIE 2013)

My dietary needs are met	The food is local and seasonable
A carer, family member or friend is present	The food is freshly cooked
I am involved in food preparation	I have time – I am not rushed
I am asked what my preference is	The food is accessible
The food looks appetising	I have privacy

Interviews lasted between 40 and 60 minutes and were audio recorded with participants' permission. Consent was considered an ongoing process (Corrigan, 2003); as such participants were reminded of the aims of the project and provided the opportunity for questions and feedback throughout their involvement.

Analysis

Symbolic interactionism was employed as theoretical perspective with which to interpret meanings from interview transcripts, specifically the meanings individuals attached to mealtimes. This approach assumes that social life is symbolic, and is reproduced through social interaction (Blumer, 1980). Data from food diaries and interviews were transcribed following data collection, with clear delineations between categories developed by the

participant and those developed by the researcher. Interview transcripts were initially reviewed to identify data-driven codes, that is, recognisable moments in the data (Boyatzis, 1998). This inductive process led to the creation of a code-book. Thematic analysis was subsequently used to search for important categories and relationships that could group codes together on Microsoft Excel. Analysis took place concurrently with data collection, allowing for the applicability of codes to be appraised as an integral part of the research process.

Food diaries and card sort exercises were used primarily as a stimulus for discussion. Food diaries were used to build a picture of mealtimes in the households of participants, as with Marshall & Anderson (2002). Data on the number of eating occasions in the house, with or without company, and who prepared the meal available in the diary, was counted. In addition, priority rankings of participants were tabulated and used analysed alongside interview data using the constant comparison method to identify similarity or difference. The tabulated outcomes of food diaries and ranking exercises represent a basic form of content analysis (Joffe & Yardley, 2004). These numerical descriptors were considered of analytical value only in context of the thematic analysis.

Findings and discussion

Mealtimes are at once pragmatic and symbolic. Examining the everyday food practices of older people highlights important processes surrounding social interaction and identity construction (Caplan, 1997; McIntosh et al., 2010; Plastow et al., 2015). This study, which aimed to document the food practices of older people living at home alone, identified a number of themes relating to these issues. For the purposes of this paper, focus is given to the meanings attributed by participants to the food practices around domestic eating and eating out. □

Table 2 summarises the differences between experiences of dining in and dining out articulated by participants. Dining in was characterized by most as everyday meals, eaten at home. These meals were described as requiring food related work, and were

predominantly eaten alone. Participants considered food preference and eating time as key priorities for enjoyable dining in experiences. By contrast, food preference was not considered an important aspect of dining out. Instead, sociability, freedom from food labour and the rarity of eating events outside the home were stated as key sources of enjoyment when dining out. The lunch club was perceived as one of the few places participants could go in order to eat out due to limited mobility and transport options. These distinctions are explained with reference to interview data and discussed under four themes: *the norm of dining in, eating alone as a positive experience, dining out as a 'treat', and what makes a good meal.*

Table 2: Conceptual differences between dining in and dining out according to participants

	Dining in	Dining out
1	Everyday	Rare
2	Solitude enjoyed	Company enjoyed
3	Requiring food work	Freedom from food work
4	Food preference important	Food preference not important

1. The norm of dining in

Food diary and interview data highlighted that most food consumption amongst participants occurred at home. Some participants demonstrated idiosyncratic, ritualised domestic food practices, for example, eating the same things at the same time each day. One participant described eating a cheesecake slice at 3.30pm every day; another, two digestive biscuits at 7.30pm daily, and another prepared cooked a breakfast of potato scone, egg, beef sausage, hash brown, spaghetti and a half cup of milk each day. Routinized food practices were especially evident amongst those whose mealtime schedules were not maintained by professional carers.

Often such domestic food practices held particular meanings to participants as they related to notions of family, including childhood and marriage: □

Researcher: I notice that you have Wensleydale cheese and biscuits every day before □ bed, can you tell me a little bit about that? □

Ellen: My father was always going around farms and places; he always came back with □ Wensleydale cheese that he picked up from some farm or other. With the result I have □ a taste for Wensleydale cheese. □

However, the meaning of domestic mealtimes to participants varied with other factors, including the day of the week or the social context. Many noted specific, alternative ‘dining in’ routines for weekends, such as having a pint of beer, a late breakfast or a ‘Sunday’ roast. In addition, having visitors at mealtimes created a more formal dining experience at home both in □ terms of the menu as well as the practices surrounding the consumption of the meal: □

I’m very proper when I have visitors. You know, but when I’ve got visitors I’ve got □ everything right on the table (Gina) □

The incidence of dining out, outwith the lunch club, reported by participants ranged from rarely to not at all. Most participants explained their infrequent dining out habits in reference to restricted mobility or chronic illness. In light of these, access to commercial dining venues was considered limited: □

When you have a disability, it makes it difficult to get out. [The lunch club] is about □ the only place you can come (Humphrey) □

Therefore, dining in, specifically, dining in alone, constituted the majority of mealtime experiences for participants; yet the meaning of meals eaten at home varied according to particular temporal or social factors. This suggests that, whilst the extent of eating out and irregular eating amongst young people is increasing in the UK (Tyrrell et al., 2016), this trend □ does not have uniform application across age groups. Instead participant accounts of domestic eating habits closely resemble a ‘proper meal’ indigenous to

Britain, as conceptualised by Murcott (1997). That is, domestic meals, of which those eaten in the evening are variations on the theme of 'meat and two veg'. Routine appeared to mark the passage of time in a way that was predictable and reflected participants' life course. Experiences of leisure at weekends often involved the use of food as a way of keeping Sunday special (Hardyment, 1995). This norm appears to persist in spite of changes to labour engagement and family composition within the participant group. Characterised by fewer rules and greater flexibility, the food practices associated with weekends were similar to those reported by individuals on holiday (Williams, 1997).

2. Eating alone as a positive experience

Whilst the content and practices of domestic meals varied between participants, all reported that meals were normally eaten alone. Individuals receiving paid care at home expressed that it was unusual for carers to stay with them at mealtimes. Often to stay would mean that carers' exceeded their 30-minute allocated time slot, as has been documented previously by Watkinson-Powell et al. (2014). Despite acknowledging the support of family members with food practices (food shopping and preparation), participants described the physical presence of family members at mealtimes as less frequent.

Interestingly, participants largely valued the solitude of dining in alone. In food diaries dining in alone was linked with feelings of 'contentment' 'content tiredness', 'happiness', 'thoughtfulness' and 'peacefulness'. Watching TV and reading the newspaper were the two most common activities taking place at mealtimes. One individual recorded stamp collecting regularly over breakfast. Participants explained these diversions as a form of company or way to relax. In some ways, this suggested autonomy over the eating environment:

I love it because I can do what I like (laughs) and I can watch TV, I can watch whatever programme I like. Except when my wee grandbairns come. Except when they're up and they say 'I want to watch this and that' and I have to let them (Gina)

The freshness and variety of foods was generally regarded as a higher priority than having a family, friend or carer present at mealtimes at home. In this way, eating alone was a practical challenge rather than an emotional one: □

We are in the habit of eating on our own. It's irrelevant whether someone is present or not. We would never eat if we had to have someone present!
(Helen)

Therefore, whilst dining in was, for the main part, experienced alone it was not described by participants as a lonely event. By contrast, dining in alone was perceived in practical terms and, at times, symbolic of independence, competence and control. Food practices reveal elements of ritual whereby patterns, identities and values are reinforced or resisted through food choices (Guptill et al., 2013). Previous analyses of eating alone emphasise the symbolic meaning of loss associated with eating alone (Andersson and Sidenvall, 2001; Lane et al., 2013). On the contrary, this study finds that participants were mindful of their personal food preferences, and likely to eat according to these in a one-person household, as with Vesnaver et al (2015). However, whether there are any gender-specific responses to social and psychological changes due to ageing in food practices is an area that requires more research (Plastow et al., 2015).

3. Dining out as a 'treat'

An emergent theme from interview transcripts was the effort required in everyday food work. For some female participants their engagement in food work had recently reduced:

This is how cooking sort of changed because once the husband died, I did use to make meals for him. At least there were two of us eating and I would try cooking. I wasn't too bad at it. But once he died, I just couldn't be bothered preparing a whole load of vegetables and things for myself (Ellen)

For some male participants, food-related tasks presented a novel workload:

[My wife] did most of the work. This is all new to me – cooking, housework, shopping (David)

There was a widespread belief that cooking was synonymous with ‘bothering’. Only one participant stated that she missed being involved with food preparation. Research indicates that men and women living alone often perceive preparation of food as a need rather than a pleasure (Turrini et al., 2010). An attitude that ‘domestic work is oppressive’ is prevalent in the UK survey data, particularly amongst female respondents (Warde and Martens, 2000). ‘Not bothering’ might be interpreted as a rational and acceptable response to challenges encountered in food preparation. Mattsson Sydner et al. (2007) view simplified cooking as an adaptive strategy used in older age when individuals have more time to eat but less motivation. However in this study it was difficult to discern whether ‘not bothering’ emerged from financial, emotional or practical concerns. One way to theorize ‘not bothering’ is to look at issues of complex morality, norms and values that could underpin impressions of practicality in food-related work (Bugge & Almas, 2006).

On the other hand, dining out was regarded as an activity free from labour and as having a luxurious quality. Four participants stressed that an attractive feature of the lunch club was having a meal put down in front of them. In one case, the opportunity to dine out was an expression of love between one participant and their family members:

It was my birthday here on Wednesday so [my daughters] are taking me to a carvery on Saturday for my lunch. So that’s my treat. I’m going on Saturday (Madeline)

Therefore, dining out in the lunch club and other locations were perceived with ‘specialness’, arguably in part due to their break from everyday food labour.

4. What makes a good meal

Participants viewed food choice as the highest priority for eliciting satisfaction at mealtimes. All ten participants ranked ‘I am asked what my preference is’ as the most important SCIE guideline conducive to pleasurable mealtimes. However, during interviews, participants did not elaborate on the content of meals eaten out. No participant stated that the quality of the meal or particular foodstuffs was a motivating

factor for, or valued aspect of, dining out at the lunch club. Instead, the sociability of dining out was prioritized over and above the material content of meals: □

The main thing as far as I'm concerned is the company. That's the reason I come□basically (Daniel) □

Although having preferred food choice was considered critical to enjoyable everyday meals, this material aspect appeared to matter little when dining out. Indeed, the actual food consumed□at mealtimes was valued less in the context of a more gratifying, social context at the lunch club. This suggests that the modes of gratification from dining in and dining out differ. Warde and Martens (2000) show that dining out is often associated with pleasure and gratification, by offering economic exchange, experimentation and relaxed interaction. A sense of accomplishment, derived from performing roles in a dining out experience, is posited to□overshadow all other sources of gratification. □Findings from this study would appear to support Warde and Marten's hypothesis, by evidencing that social interaction often confers dining out with special characteristics. Thus, even in the absence of food choice (for example, at the lunch club), the experience remains a gratifying one.

Conclusion

The aim of this small-scale study was to explore the mealtime experiences of older people living alone, who attend at lunch club in South East Scotland. In so doing it uncovers that the meaning of mealtimes, according to older people living alone, appears to shift when eaten□alone and eaten in company. Amongst this group, gratification from dining out is more closely□associated with the social context than the material (food) context of mealtimes. On the other□hand, gratification from dining in is more closely associated with the material (food) context,□for example, meeting preferences for food choice and eating times. These conclusions chime with Warde and Martens (2000) hypothesis that dining out is a 'social accomplishment'. It is worth noting that, in this study, pleasurable experiences from dining out at the lunch club were heightened due to

their rarity i.e. the lunch club was perceived one of the few places participants could go. Lunch clubs therefore offer older people a dining out experience; one that is part commercial, part communal in character. This specific mode of dining out, its socio-spatial nature and the variation it encompasses, has received little attention until this point. Population- ageing raises the research agenda for further investigating the situational factors at work in this form of food consumption outside the home by community-dwelling individuals. □

Furthermore, this study highlights that dining in alone is often a means of realising individuality and independence in older age. Mealtimes here symbolised living alone and the practicalities of this, rather than lonely living to participants in one-person households. For policy-makers this implies action to ensure that choice and control over food practices at home is achievable. Current policy favours care provision in the community for as long as possible. However, this study suggests that in practice there may be insufficient resources for individuals to realise their perceived mealtime preferences at home. More research is needed in other local authorities in Scotland to understand how widespread this disparity is. For carers, family members, health practitioners and older people role it implies initiating conversations about food to uncover the personal biography of food preference and everyday practices. Such conversations have been shown to provide a deeper understanding of food choice, which may subsequently be drawn upon to improve mealtimes experiences in and outside the home. □

Strengths

This study offers novel insights into the food practices of older people living alone. As the number of older people living at home alone is projected to increase over the next 20 years to an unprecedented level (National Records of Scotland, 2016), research investigating the priorities of, and potential problems faced by, individuals in this population regarding their food practices is of considerable importance. It further advances the use of food diaries as a research tool, to collect data on the rituals and routines surrounding food. Developing the contribution of Andersson and Marshall

(2000), the use of food diaries as a stimulus for discussion here allowed for the social and emotional aspect of mealtimes to be captured. Moreover this study contextualises food practices literature within a policy setting in Scotland, to raise discussion on the consequences of shifts to community care models on the everyday food and eating.

Limitations

Whilst not seeking generalizability, the sample size and geographical focus of this study reduce the diversity of viewpoints and everyday practices at large in the wider population of older people living alone at home in Scotland. Participants involved in the study were all connected with the lunch club, whose members often demonstrate a propensity to join in with other social events or activities (Wilson, 2009). Variability in personal disposition, types of social networks, level of disability, income, and other factors may therefore have been limited. Consequently, the applicability of findings across older people living at home in different locations in Scotland, with differential access to social and other resources, is constrained. However, the study sample varied regarding gender, age, health status, and type and level of support received at home. Moreover, the findings may extend to people of other ages living alone.

Diary and interview data here were sensitive to bias. Specifically data collected was subject to the constraints of self-report, thus potentially mediated based on what participants believe the researcher wanted to hear (Rapley, 2007). Furthermore, as a result of the interview schedule design, most data available concerned food consumption. Food practices conceptually covers the acquisition, preparation, serving, consuming and disposal of food (Jastran et al., 2009). Future research should broaden the focus to include food disposal, in order to provide a more detailed illustration of the prioritization and preparation of food in the homes of older people who live alone.

Finally, due to the theoretical perspective employed in the study of symbolic interactionism, it is challenging to measure the extent to which individuals had control over circumstances, particularly, how control, or lack thereof, interacted with preferences. Symbolic interpretivism is one way of making sense of food practices.

Therefore, this study points to avenues for other theoretical perspectives, including critical analysis to use the same, or similar data, to interpret power imbalances at work.

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