

## **Auto ethnography**

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*HNFE 3224: Communicating with Food*

My diet and relationship with food could best be compared to an amusement park ride; it has many bumps, turns, and loops that have brought me to where I am today. I have always been a creature of habit, sticking to diet and meal staples. As a child I preferred the same breakfast and lunch and a few varied dinners. This hasn't changed, but the foods that I choose to eat have. That is where the turns in my diet occurred. As a child I enjoyed staples such as cereals and Kraft macaroni and cheese, but those staples have evolved with my ever-changing taste buds and life events. Currently my diet seems to revolve around what I can put on a potato or in an omelet. My meals were not consumed at the kitchen table on a regular basis until I was in high school. As a child I grew up eating my meals watching morning cartoons on the couch or in the car late at night on the way home from a dance class. Most of my car dinners were fast food staples such as Subway turkey sandwiches, McDonalds' chicken nuggets and apple pies, and Pizza Hut every Saturday night. Family meals around a common table were reserved for special occasions such as Christmas dinner or Easter brunch. I can remember hearing about my friends' family life, which included a hot dinner prepared by their parents and consumed around a table each night, and being envious. But I didn't begin to question my own and my family's dietary habits until I reached high school.

The first loop in my diet came when I read my first diet book and became aware of calories, fat, and other fad diet trends that circulated in the media and around my fellow ballet classmates. I became obsessed with what food I ate and began questioning whether or not I should or could eat certain foods. I had grown up in a family where no food was ever off limits, but with this new framework for what made up the perfect diet, I limited certain food groups because I believed they were not good for my body or for my future as a ballerina. This obsession with discovering the perfect diet was a part of my development of anorexia nervosa, and through recovery from this mental illness my views of food and nutrition and how I enjoyed my food took another loop of change. For the first time in my memory all of my meals were prepared at home, composed of a balanced ratio of each macronutrient, and eaten at a kitchen table with both of my parents. The television and prime time shows were turned off and forgotten during our time together around that special table.

The most important thing that developed as a result of my recovery however was the knowledge that people have different preferences when it comes to food. During my eating disorder I was consumed with not only my own food, but other's food choices as well. There were many times when I would sit and observe what other people were eating, wondering what went into their head as they made choices at each meal. What questions did they ask themselves? I wondered if diet and nutritional qualities encompassed their decision-making, or if they ate the same things every day. Did they eat alone or with a group of friends or family for their meals? How often did they eat out and did it make them uncomfortable? This is when I realized that everyone was different, and just because I make my food decisions based on certain factors such as my recovery meal plan, taste preferences from childhood, and what the people around me are choosing, other individuals will have other considerations or taste preferences based on their needs and desires and how they were raised.

Just as my diet evolved throughout my childhood and adolescence, I fully expect it to change in adulthood as my life style moves from that of a college student to a dietetic intern, and

eventually into a working individual with a family. Right now my life revolves around classes, tests, a part-time job, and multiple deadlines. My diet fits with this lifestyle in the healthiest way possible. I have no set times to eat. I enjoy my meals in a way that will help me function best throughout my day, if that means waking up early before class or work in the laboratory to have a good breakfast I set my alarm and make it happen. There are days when my schedule is so packed I have no time for a sit down lunch. I have learned to pack snacks and eat when I can. Sometimes I get home late due to class, work, or a random trip to the gym, on these nights dinner may be late but I have found meals that are quick and easy to prepare and consume, such as omelets, crock pot soup recipes, and leftovers from nights when I had time to cook. Being a college student has taught me the importance of flexibility in my daily diet, and those past car dinners ended up benefiting me by showing me there is no “correct” place to eat. I know this flexibility will be essential to my success and health in the future. Right now I only have to worry about my own personal diet, but one day I hope to have a family and responsibility for not only choosing food for myself but also for my children. I recognize that the way I was raised may not be how I choose to raise my children. Although fast meals in the car were necessary for me and have helped me adapt to a busy college schedule, I hope I will be able to prepare and enjoy meals for my future family around a communal table. Even if we don’t all like or choose the same things for every meal I believe sitting down and enjoying a meal as a family is important in the growth and development of children and their relationships with food later in life. As I am placed in different environments and situations I fully expect the foods I eat daily to evolve and change. Certain daily staples such as my favorite fruits and vegetables, or a love for tea each morning may remain the same; but the dishes I make will change with the times as I am introduced to new cultures and their food preferences.

Messages regarding food, nutrition and exercise consume our society today. It isn’t often that an individual can open a magazine or watch a television show without reading or hearing something new in terms of what and how to eat. Each individual is affected by food in a different way. For me it was spending over 6 hours a day in a dance studio and hearing about how my diet would affect my abilities and career as a ballerina. Now I am in a major that focuses on the facts regarding what people should eat to be healthy, and I would be lying if I said there wasn’t an unstated pressure to eat the “right” way. As a future food and nutrition professional I hope to dispel fad diet myths and teach my core belief that there is no such thing as a perfect diet. I hope to never try to change an individual’s beliefs and customs when it comes to his or her diet. Each individual is different in terms of personal lifestyles and values. It will be my job to work with those core beliefs and habits to help them follow a diet that meets their dietary needs while still enabling them to enjoy food in their own unique way.

Food and my diet experiences have helped to shape me as an individual and professional in the field of nutrition. These experiences will serve as valuable assets as I begin working in the field of dietetics. Because my diet changed with every new experience and culture I was placed in, I am aware that every person I serve will require something different from me. It will be my job to take into account each person’s differences in terms of dietary preferences, cultural background, and other individual unique aspects they may have and help them to make choices that will enhance their health and life.