The Use of Family Rituals in Eating Behaviors in Mexican American Mothers

Anel Arriola, BS; Kathryn Coe, PhD; Tanya Benitez, PhD; Natasha Tasevska, PhD; Colleen Keller, PhD; Arizona State University, College of Nursing & Health Innovation

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• The research described in this paper was aimed at exploring traditional food rituals as practiced by Mexican American women and the way those rituals might change in response to immigration to the U.S.

• Our working hypothesis is that rituals related not only to the consumption of food, but its procurement and preparation are important and their loss may play a role in the epidemic of obesity.
Characteristics of rituals

• For millennia, the performance of complex and frequent rituals has characterized traditional societies around the world.

• According to archaeologists, our distant ancestors began to ritualize behaviors associated with food procurement, preparation and presentation as far back as 20,000 years ago when they began making ground stone tools.
Examples include mortars, pestles and milling stones.
Even today, people around the world regularly insist on rituals such as special places and times for eating, the use of special equipment with stylized decoration, predictable sequence among the foods eaten, and proper dress and behavior.
Characteristics of rituals

• The ritualization of any behavior not only results in the slowing down of the behavior, but food rituals can come with the requirement that participants restrain their consumption.

• Not surprisingly, food rituals are said to have psychological effects, heightening our enjoyment of food and stimulating goal directed action, while decreasing the likelihood of distracted eating.
Characteristics of rituals

- When Latino families migrate to the U.S., food rituals often abruptly change.
- While one possible effect of the loss of these rituals is an increased prevalence of obesity, the effect that the loss of these rituals has on health and well-being is seldom if ever the focus of research studies.
- Food rituals, consequently, may play a role in healthful eating and may serve as leverage points for interventions designed to promote healthy eating behaviors within a family.
Obesity and migration

- Certain ethnic groups within the U.S. have higher rates of obesity
  - Mexican-American females, for example, have higher rates of overweight and obesity and metabolic syndrome than do non-Hispanic white women.
  - Studies of obesity in Mexican American women show that they experienced significant increases in the incidence of BMI defined obesity during the last decade.
Obesity and migration

• Migration to the U.S. is associated with *loss of cultural practices*, as well as the adoption of the so called westernized lifestyle, including:
  o Decreased physical activity (PA)
  o Increased time spent watching TV
  o Limited time for food preparation
  o Greater reliance on fast-foods
  o Increased consumption of processed foods, meat, sweets and dairy
  o Decreased consumption of fruits, vegetables, legumes, beans, grains and fruit juices
Sample

- Data were collected in two stages,
  1. focus groups (5, 13 participants)
  2. follow up face to face interviews (n =3)
- Thirteen low-income, overweight/obese Mexican-American women ages 27-40 years residing in Phoenix, Arizona, were recruited from the participant pool of Madres para la Salud.
• Participants who signed a consent to be re-contacted were called by Spanish-speaking research staff to determine interest and screen for eligibility in the focus group study.

• Eligible participants were then scheduled to attend one focus group session on nutrition and physical activity.
After all focus groups were completed, three women who attended the groups were randomly selected and invited to participate in a follow-up structured interview on family traditions, the role of traditions and rituals in food procurement, preparation and presentation.
Focus groups

• The development of the focus group script was guided by a review of literature and identification of gaps in research on food preparation in Mexican-American women.

• Focus group discussion questions elicited information on food procurement, preparation, presentation, family traditions in the Latino culture, including patterns of shopping, food purchases, specific and memorable meals, and involvement of family in food preparation.
Individual interviews were guided by a script consisting of seven open-ended questions and prompts focused on family traditions, and the role of traditions and habits in food procurement, preparation and presentation.

The focus group and interview scripts were translated and back-translated from English to Spanish by bilingual members of the research team to ensure accuracy and comprehension of the questions.
Data analysis

- The typed transcripts of the interviews and focus groups were the data for analysis.
- Transcripts and audiotaped interviews were compared to ensure accurate translation.
- Content analysis guided description of the data, with the identification of data codes and data categories, and included an iterative approach and constant comparison in data analysis.
Data analysis

• Qualitative content analysis was used to capture and extend knowledge and understanding of cultural and contextual sources for food procurement, preparation and presentation among Mexican-American mothers.
One woman described food procurement in some detail.

“When I was little, I lived with my Grandma in Mexico. So the food that she made was always fresh, traditional. Every day, we went to the grocery store, the butcher. The butcher knew her and he would give her the best meat, soft and with the least grease. Then we bought what we would be eating that day…. Then, when I started living with my parents [in the U.S.], I was a little older, and everything changed completely, because they worked all of the time. Then, they had lots of soda, something that I didn’t really drink when I was younger”.

Traditional rituals involving the procurement of food
Traditional rituals involving the procurement of food

• A number of women reported that shopping for healthier foods was easier in Mexico because of the variety of fruits available, but difficult in the U.S. due to the temptation to buy chips and bread, when they had gone to the store to buy fruits, vegetables and meat.

• The major difference between the US and Mexico is that Mexican stores are small stores like the “verdulería” – vegetable store – you can buy any vegetable, legume or fruit.
Traditional rituals involving the procurement of food

• Depending on where you live, there will be various small “verdulerías” around where you live. In the US, there are no small stores. Each time you need food, you have to go to the supermarket where you can find everything at any time.

• Other women reported that they had much less time now and had to take short cuts or eat fast food outside the home.

Mercado in Mexico City
When discussing the preparation of food several patterns were revealed.

First, participants described what they ate and explained that people were seldom hungry, even when they were poor. Food preparation, and, thus, food purchases included the rich use of spices and preparation adjuncts.

“There are these “stores” it’s called a “molino” and they sell all sorts of grains, dry peppers, spices and moles that are grinded already. They also sell things like almonds, nuts.”

“Of cooking, well, over there we cooked … more vegetables than here. Here we eat more, like, meat than over in Mexico.”

“One really does not prepare mole like in Mexico, because in Mexico one grinds everything.”
A second pattern that emerged were descriptions of the utensils used. One participant claimed that the “mill, and the griddle [were used] to roast everything.”

Another described the traditional utensils used by her mother and grandmother.

“The beans were cooked in a clay pot...and the spoons also of wood. They were made of wood.”
Another woman, however, mentioned that her mother cooked beans in a clay pot, until she heard of a study that said this practice was dangerous due to lead. She concluded:

“My mom would use it for the beans, the clay pot. She had it for 5 or 6 years until [there was a] study [that] said that it was dangerous because of lead and … my mom did not want to use that pot, and it was not that she was taught to use that pot, but she kept it as a remembrance.”
Traditional rituals involving the preparation of food

- Other utensils mentioned included tin tubs, comales (or long hot plates) pewter pots and spoons.

- “And I remember that she didn’t have where to make the tamales in, and she made them over a fire in a [tin] tub, the big kind where clothes are washed outdoors.”
A third pattern to emerge was a description of the kin who got them involved in cooking and the process of learning to cook, which they explained was by observation and guided practice.

“Well, my aunts taught me how to cook too. For example, they taught me how to make enchiladas. More than anything they taught me that with one food you can make a ton of meals. That is what they taught me to save the food.”

“… they taught me those things, if you do not have a roller then use bottle … little things [like] if you do not have something to grind the salsa or a bean masher, oh use a cup”
Several participants mentioned that they tried to continue the tradition of preparing and serving traditional food, but it was difficult to find the right ingredients:

“I didn’t know where to buy Mexican products and I bought others I didn’t like.”

Further, when they tried serving traditional meals to children, the children indicated that they preferred hamburgers and fries or chicken nuggets or pizza

“my children,” several women reported, “like the food that they get at school better – they become accustomed to that food because they spend more time at school than they do at home.”

Several participants reported attempting to teach their children not only to prepare food, but to clean up after a meal.
Another pattern that emerged were descriptions of how important the social aspects of meals were. When describing a memorable and ideal dinner, participants emphasized importance of people, of meals being family oriented.

“Some [meals] are more special because sometimes there is more, uhm, a family member that is coming from far away, and then you feel happy because they came. And not others because it’s almost just my husband, me, and my kids there.”

“All Christmases are memorable but that one in my life I remember is because, well, many people went to the house, so many that we did not fit inside the house.”
In this study we examined traditional food rituals and their loss related to migration.

We found that significant changes did occur in rituals of food procurement, preparation, and presentation. These changes were related not only to the fact that women were working outside the home, which was not true in all cases, but to the fact that ingredients were unavailable locally, that recipes had been forgotten and that the necessary utensils were unavailable as they remained in Mexico with family members there.

Women did appear to recognize that the loss of these rituals had social effects and they indicated some nostalgia for the rituals in which they had participated in Mexico, which included many members of their families. They also recognized that they were not teaching their children the rituals they had known in Mexico although in several cases attempts were made to do so.
Discussion

• These results, suggest that an important aspect of teaching nutrition to displaced persons may be lessons that acknowledge that women now have less time, but help her, within those confines, to re-ritualize the procurement, preparation, and presentation of food.

• This could include lessons in shopping with children (e.g., how to use this opportunity to build social ties and teach them about healthy eating), cooking classes for mothers and children and lessons on low-fat Mexican cooking.
Discussion

- They also could include lessons on table decoration, manners, and storytelling at meals. While table manners may seem to be an archaic concept, manners are important in helping ensure the occasion is a comfortable one for all participating.

- It also could include information exchange on how to find the ingredients needed locally so they can continue to prepare the foods they love.
Thank you!

Questions?

Anel Arriola
a.arriola@asu.edu