



Original Research Article

Against the odds: The survival of traditional food knowledge in a rural Albertan community

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Abstract

The globalization and industrialization of the agri-food system has been linked to declining knowledge and skills in the general population related to growing, preserving and cooking food. In rural communities, loss of this knowledge and associated culture and traditions has been further exacerbated by depopulation due to outmigration and the subsequent erosion of social and physical infrastructure. Counter to this trend of food deskilling, however, are the efforts of individuals who are actively working to maintain and perpetuate traditional food practices. The purpose of this research was to understand what factors motivate and enable the preservation of gardening, cooking and canning skills among a group of women and their children in a small rural community in Alberta. Qualitative research methods were used to gather relevant data, which were analyzed using a social practice theoretical lens. Findings from this study revealed four conditions influencing the continuation of these social practices among the research participants: the experience and history of scarcity; normative expectations; a close connection to family; and, development of a community of practice. This study illustrates the relevance of a social practice framework for examining food knowledge and skills, and points to the potential of this approach for understanding and promoting pro-environmental behaviour and sustainable consumption in the food system.

Key words: canning; cooking; gardening; deskilling; rural Alberta; social practice theory; traditional food knowledge.

Introduction

Over the past one hundred years, agriculture and food have undergone a radical transformation due to changes in technologies and techniques, increasing standardization and processing of food, and the globalization of commodities and markets (Goodman & Redclift, 1991). The restructuring of food and agriculture has dramatically increased the social and spatial distance between production, processing, and consumption, resulting in what some scholars have referred to as the ‘disembedding’ (Novek, 2003; Wittman, Beckie & Hergesheimer, 2011) character of ‘food from nowhere’ (Fonte, 2010). Consumers’ adaptation to normative pressures for convenience, casualness and speed has significantly altered food habits, family life, and consumption rituals (Jaffe & Gertler, 2006; Shove, 2003). The subsequent deskilling of the general population has usurped the long-held knowledge, skills, values, and cultural traditions surrounding the growing, preserving and cooking of food (Bruckmeier, 2006; Fonte, 2010; Woods, 2005)—what we define in this paper as ‘traditional food knowledge’. Loss of this knowledge has been exacerbated in rural communities by depopulation due to outmigration and the subsequent erosion of social and physical infrastructure (Epp, 2001).

Counter to this trend of food deskilling, resistance to the globalized agri-food system is increasing and can be identified, in part, in the efforts of individuals working to maintain and perpetuate traditional food practices. This research focuses on ten women based in the town and surrounding rural community of Stony Plain, Alberta, who are actively engaged in utilizing and mobilizing traditional food knowledge in the daily lives of their families and in their communities through gardening, cooking, and canning. Many current food studies examine separately the roles of producers and consumers. In this research we identified rural women whose food practices defy this dualistic analysis and who instead form a continuum from production to processing, cooking, and consumption. The type of knowledge that they embody mirrors goals of the alternative food movement to increase local capacity and self-sufficiency, in order to maintain or take back control over the food system.

This paper embraces ‘the practice turn’ in contemporary theory (Reckwitz, 2002) by going back to the garden and the kitchen to understand how traditional food knowledge has been utilized and maintained in a rural community despite the larger changes taking place in the agri-food system. This approach heeds Shove, Pantzar and Watson’s (2012) call to find ways of describing and analyzing changing food practices while also accounting for more faithful, consistent forms of food skills reproduction. We not only seek to understand how practices shape and influence traditional food knowledge within a rural community, but we also aim, more broadly, to demonstrate how a social practice theoretical approach can make an important sociological contribution to food studies.

We begin with an overview of our research methods, followed by a review of the literature on social practice theory, traditional knowledge, deskilling, and its relevance to the study of food. This is followed by results and discussion of the findings. We conclude with a brief summary of the research results and a commentary on the contribution of a social practice theory approach to the sociological study of food.

Methods

We situated this qualitative research in the town and surrounding rural community of Stony Plain, Alberta due to its proximity and easy access from the University of Alberta in Edmonton, where we are based, and also because its rich cultural and agricultural heritage. Despite being within a 45-minute drive from the metropolitan, provincial capital of Edmonton, Stony Plain (population 15,000) maintains a small town atmosphere and has a well-established Heritage Agricultural Society¹ based in the Multicultural Heritage Centre², which runs a myriad of programs in the community, many with an agricultural or food focus. The Stony Plain Women's Institute³ is also active in the community. Without prior connections in the community, the Women's Institute and the Multicultural Heritage Centre provided us with lists of potential research participants from the community who are still actively engaged in canning, gardening and cooking.

Participants were recruited utilizing both 'purposeful' (Maxwell, 2013, p. 97) and snowball sampling methods. Ten women between the ages of 50 and 70 were selected based on their willingness and desire to be a part of the project, and on their current food practices. Each participant had to be actively engaged in at least two of the three practices, however most had done all three throughout the course of their lives. The sample size is relatively small, but interviewees were considered to be experts in traditional food knowledge and practices, and as such, we were able to gather in-depth, descriptive data. However, given the small sample size and the specific context within this community, these results cannot be considered generalizable.

Data were primarily gathered through semi-structured interviews, averaging 60–90 minutes in length; these were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participant observation was also conducted at relevant events in the community: the annual Valentine's Day Tea, Women's Institute meetings; the Stony Plain farmers' market, and at the Multicultural Heritage Center. Following the completion of the interviews, we hosted a focus group with the participants to provide an opportunity for them to reflect further on their practices within a group setting, and also to provide the researchers an opportunity to follow up on interesting points that arose during the interviews.

These three qualitative research methods (interviews, participant observation, focus group) were used to explore the following dimensions determined as relevant to this research: food practices and traditions, past, present, and future; motivations and desires related to food practices; and inter-generational mobilization of knowledge and skills. These dimensions were identified as relevant based on themes in the literature on deskilling, traditional knowledge, and alternative food movements, as well as the researcher's own interests. Using QSR NVivo to code and analyze the data gathered, four key conditions were identified that foster and shape traditional food practices for the research participants: the experience of scarcity; strong normative expectations; close connection or relationship to a family member; and a cohesive community of practice.

¹ The Heritage Agricultural Society of Stony Plain is a non-profit organization (est. 1974) dedicated to the preservation of the regional cultural heritage (<http://multicentre.org/wp/has-board/heritage-agricultural-society>).

² The Multicultural Heritage Centre consists of the restored Old Brick School and the Oppertshauser House, both provincial heritage buildings, as well as the Stony Plain Demonstration Farm (<http://multicentre.org>).

³ The Stony Plain Women's Institute is a branch of the Alberta's Women's Institute (<http://awi.athabascau.ca>) which was developed to help rural women acquire home management and leadership skills, strengthen communities through active involvement, and build mutually beneficial social networks.

Literature review

Social practice theory

Social practice theory departs from traditional accounts of food system analysis that tend to emphasize social norms, structure, symbolism or agency as the problem, but instead describes the world as constructed and ordered by social practices (Johnston & Szabo, 2011). As Warde (2005) suggests, practices have a trajectory or history and that history is differentiated. The principal implication of a theory of practice is that the sources of changed social behaviour lie in the development of practices themselves. Thus, it is neither individual behaviour nor societal structures exclusively that affect behaviours, but rather everyday practices like cooking, driving, washing, shopping, or playing. As Giddens (1984) observed:

[The] basic domain of study of the social sciences...is neither the experience of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of societal totality, but social practices ordered across space and time. (p. 240)

The performance of numerous social practices is thus seen as part of “the routine accomplishment of what we identify as ‘normal’ ways of life” (Shove, 2004, p.117). Practices are the source and carrier of meaning, language, and normativity (Schatzki, 2001). As Reckwitz (2002) argues, wants and emotions do not belong to individuals but—in the form of knowledge—to practices. In this view, attention is diverted away from individual decision-making towards the ‘doing’ of different social practices and the types of consumption they entail (Hargreaves, 2011). Importantly, practice theory emphasizes that it is through these engagements with practices that individuals come to understand the world around them and to develop a more or less coherent sense of self (Warde, 2005).

Recent developments in systematizing theories of practice (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki et al., 2001), and its application to the field of consumption, including food, (Halkier, 2011; Strengers, 2012; Warde, 2005) point out two distinct ways of understanding practice. *Practice as performance* (practice as immediacy of doing), and *practice as entity* (practice as a block or pattern, embodied, materially mediated, shared meaning), both having a recursive and co-constitutive relation (Truninger, 2011). According to Shove, Pantzar, and Watson (2012) practice consists of three basic elements: materials (objects, infrastructure, tools, hardware, and the body itself); competencies (knowledge, skills, technique); and meanings (social and symbolic significance of participation). Practice as entity is held together by these heterogeneous elements, which are linked by practitioners when practices are performed. In this way, practices exist, persist, or disappear when the links between these three elements are created, sustained, or broken (Truninger, 2011). For example, preparing and partaking in a traditional Thanksgiving meal—that includes specific food dishes particular to a family or culture—will imply that one has the proper equipment to prepare the meal and physical ability to do so (the object); it will require some technical skills and knowledge to cook the food properly and make things taste delicious (the competencies); and it will also entail the motivational knowledge formed from the social and symbolic significance of eating particular foods with particular people (the meaning). These meanings and emotions could be about evoking the memory of traditions past, or the desire to sustain family bonds and identity, or to ensure certain serving and dining practices are reflected and normalized within the family unit (Wallendorf & Arnould, 1991). An important

point here is to note that meanings and emotions do not emerge from self-contained individuals, but rather ‘belong to’ the practice (Røpke, 2009, p. 2492).

Traditional food knowledge and practices

Knowledge is a critical component of the competencies and meanings that are associated with food practices. Within the context of this research, the concept of ‘traditional food knowledge’ has been derived and utilized from the perspective that knowledge is much more than a mere accumulation of information and facts, but rather a process lived out through experience and passed from generation to generation, continually being readapted, reformed and influenced.

Fonte (2010) contends that traditional knowledge does not perform a specialized function in society, but rather embodies cultural values as an element integrated into a vast and complex set of beliefs and knowledge that is held collectively and transmitted both orally and through common practices, from generation to generation. Traditional food knowledge, then, represents the cumulative wisdom of many generations of people who have learned how to produce, prepare, store, and teach these practices of food provisioning. Traditional food knowledge also symbolizes the often unrecognized and undocumented work of these people (primarily women), their temporally accumulated knowledge, and the formal and informal sharing and education that ensures this knowledge is kept alive. Its scope also goes beyond the technical skills required to procure food, to include the specific cultural meanings and historical context that has shaped the particular types of food prepared and consumed within that community. Three separate but overlapping aspects of traditional food knowledge were examined in this research: food procurement in the form of gardening; food preparation in the form of cooking; and food preservation in the form of canning. These represent three broad categories of social practices within traditional food knowledge.

Deskilling and food practices

Anxiety over the ‘impoverished state of domestic cooking’ that is highlighted by the media, and more recently by celebrity chefs, has garnered significant public interest and academic inquiry over the last decade. In general, scholars have suggested that the erosion of skills held by previous generations was linked to the breakdown of traditional domestic divisions of labour associated with increased labour market participation by women and the effects of technologies—leading to both deskilling in the kitchen and distracting children from being in the kitchen to absorb tacit cooking skills (Meah & Watson, 2011; Short, 2006).

Studies suggest that food meanings and practices contribute to family identity and domestic life. DeVault (1991) identifies the household meal as a way to construct home and family around shared consumption practices. Food practices also influence social reproduction. For example, Beoku-Betts (1995) suggests that Gullah communities use food preparation and consumption practices to transmit cultural traditions, collective memories, and foster culturally prescribed skills related to self-reliance. Further, Wallendorf and Arnould (1991) found that in a Thanksgiving context intergenerational transmissions of recipes, stories about family identity, and serving and dining practices reflected class and gender norms.

In recent decades, there has also been a resurgence of interest in re-building local food systems (DeLind, 2006; Gillespie et al., 2007; Wittman et al., 2011), healthy home cooking (Oliver, 2007; Short, 2006), and restoring the knowledge and skills associated with canning and

other food self-sufficiency practices (Click & Ridberg, 2010). Scholars and food activists alike have been examining the contributions of re-socializing and re-localizing food to the development of a more sustainable and just food system. Canning and home fermentation, for example, are now often identified as a form of alternative food activism. In their study of practices and motivations for food preservation, Click and Ridberg (2010) argue that preservation presents an opportunity to move alternative food practices away from consumer-oriented politics to a politics based upon relationships to self, others, and the earth, upholding the goals of the alternative food movement while subverting the capitalistic logic of the global agri-food industry.

In the following section, we utilize a social practice lens to analyze the data gathered in this research. The results and discussion are divided according to the four conditions identified from the data that influence and shape the continuation of the traditional food practices of gardening, cooking, and canning among the participants in this research: experience of scarcity; normative expectations; strong familial relationships; community of practice.

Results and discussion

The practices of gardening, cooking, and canning among the women changed, as expected, as a result of changes in their lives over time and the structural changes occurring in the food system and society in general in recent decades. Some of the women interviewed continue to can, although not to the same degree they used to. With the exception of two, the women still thoroughly enjoy gardening and continue to hone and perfect their abilities each passing year. All of them remain committed to cooking most of their meals from scratch, avoiding processed and packaged food, and eating out only on some occasions. In the past, when disposable income was low, and there were small children to feed, the women viewed canning and gardening as a necessity and a core responsibility of being a mother. As years passed, incomes increased, children grew up and moved out, and they eventually became less physically able to spend the entire summer in the garden and the fall preserving it; hence, practices have inevitably changed.

Despite these changes, the women we interviewed continued to take part, in varying ways, in traditional food practices reminiscent of the past. In the following section we examine the key factors that have influenced and continue to shape the food practices of this group of women in the town of Stony Plain, Alberta.

The key characteristics we discuss—while important for the highly engaged group we interviewed—are not necessarily generalizable to similarly-sized rural communities. Despite our sample size being relatively small and homogenous, this research offers insights into ways we might begin to understand food practices as social practices, with a past, a present, and a future. The following four themes—experience of scarcity, normative expectations, influence of family and friends, and communities of practice—highlight the conditions that promote and uphold certain sustainable food practices in a rural Albertan community.

Experience of scarcity and going without

The experience of living on a limited income with large families to feed left a profound and lasting mark on the memories, attitudes and skills of most of the women interviewed. With restricted access to grocery stores and limited financial means to purchase food, many women of the older generation were almost entirely reliant on the harvest from their gardens and their

canning skills to sustain their young families through the cold prairie winters. Moreover, for many of these women, the firm resolve to live off the land and ‘make do’ had been modeled to them by parents, grandparents, friends, and neighbours. Despite the fact that living conditions have dramatically improved over the course of their lives, the impact of these experiences was lifelong. The experience of scarcity, coupled with a rural, agricultural upbringing has culminated in very particular skill sets and a deep respect and appreciation for food and how that food is used. Memory has been a powerful driver and sustainer of traditional food knowledge and its corresponding practices. As one participant commented:

You’d have a hard time because you experienced poverty, you’d have a hard time seeing waste, throwing things out, a hard time not finishing your plate.

Another woman, who grew up on a farm and then farmed her whole adult life, spoke of learning how to “make do with what you had”.

I remember sitting at the table and just having a bowl of potatoes and there was a whole table full of us [my family], and there was a bowl of potatoes and she [my mother] brought it and put it on there, and that was it.

Attitudes towards what was considered waste and a strong aversion to wasting food were evidenced in almost every interview. The idea that food should never, under any circumstances, be wasted or thrown away, created part of the impetus for canning, but also for cooking soups and stews, where a variety of left-over ingredients can be used to make a healthy meal. This attitude also influenced other creative ‘value-added’ cooking tricks, as one woman explained:

Well, I used to do 350 jars of [canning] every year. And that got us through. I made a lot of meals from nothing. But I always had a good supply in my pantry. I used to make whole wheat bread and I would save all my potato water and all my vegetable water all week and I’d throw it into bread so that I got some nutrition in there for my children.

Stories of thriftiness, simple and inexpensive cleaning tricks, ways to make the meat last for several meals, and savvy shopping skills were woven throughout many of the interviews.

My aunt said that my grandma used to do anything and everything to make sure her five kids were fed, and my mom told me this, actually, when grandma would go down to the pantry to get a jar of peaches, she would take a quarter down and put it in the jar so by the time the next summer came, the money to buy the stuff for preserving was there. She didn’t have to try and find it. And that would be like me: that would be something I would do.

For some, the impetus for gardening and canning seemed to be associated with fearful memories from the past. When asked if canning was a valuable skill to have nowadays, one participant remarked:

Oh well, let's put it this way, those that don't know how to can and are instant buyers are gonna starve to death when hard times come.

The experience of scarcity in the past and a strong connection to their heritage, their families, and past social milieu demonstrated the deep and lasting impact of their childhood and young adult years.

Both parents and grandparents came through two really ugly wars, so I think maybe that rubs off on you, too—your history, your family history.

The experience of scarcity is best described as what Shove et al. (2012) call an element of a practice. This element falls under the category of 'meaning' and is largely based on what Reckwitz (2002) describes as 'motivational knowledge'. The motivational memories, which have deep social and symbolic significance for the women, serve as a solid cornerstone for the basis of their traditional food knowledge practices, and represent the profound social and symbolic significance of the myriad of participants' past experiences. There is evidence of the many different elements: bodies, tools, infrastructure, social meanings, etc. but the motivational memory demonstrated here is significant and, we would argue, defining. It is also interesting to note that the motivation neither hinges on production or consumption per se—as many sociological explorations of food do—but rather on a collective, shared, and poignant experience from the past. Schatzki (2010) notes that what people do has a history and a context, and these doings are also future-oriented. Thus, both past and future are united in the current moment of performance. This unification of past and future in current performances of gardening, cooking, and canning is well illustrated in the research findings.

Normative expectations: “That’s just what we did”

For women of the generations interviewed, having a garden, canning one's harvest, and cooking meals from scratch on a daily basis was essentially a given. This was modeled to them by their parents and grandparents, and reinforced through their own experiences of food scarcity. Consequently, for them, the reality was that there was no other way to do things.

I remember my great grandfather grew a garden. 'You don't have land and not plant it', was his attitude. I grew up seeing food growing and...what you couldn't grow you'd have to buy and preserve it because winter is long.

My mother and my grandmother always canned, my aunts, uncles, everybody.

Well, my generation, gardening was a bigger thing. You had your property and your house, and then in your backyard you had your garden, so that's what I grew up with.

As a result of these particular socio-technical and economic landscapes, there also came a unique sense of pride and satisfaction that was attached to being ‘self-sufficient’, which also perhaps perpetuated the desire to perform certain practices, for example: growing the largest pumpkins; preparing the best ‘dills’; producing the most potatoes, onions, etc.; or always bringing the best pie to a community potluck event.

Everybody in the community gardened, so if you didn’t garden, you were the odd one out. ‘I grew this’ and you could brag—bragging rights. ‘Well I grew bigger tomatoes than you!’ One year I had thirty-six tomato plants and we were hauling them out wheelbarrow after wheelbarrow.

The collective expectations were framed by particular socio-cultural, socio-technical and economic landscapes, and strongly shaped by motivational memory. By acknowledging the existence and influence of certain normative expectations that were placed on these women (living off the land, canning, being self-sufficient) and how those expectations manifested themselves (large gardens, cooking from scratch, taking pride in your harvest), it becomes evident that motivational memory and normative expectations are inherently linked. According to Shove et al. (2012), this is how practices are able to persist.

The socio-cultural and economic landscape (including the prevalence of scarcity in many of their lives) profoundly impacted how they were expected to procure, prepare, and preserve their food. This is not part of a practice in and of itself, but rather represents part of the framework or landscape for how certain practices emerged and evolved and the lasting implications this had on many of these women.

In her work on sustainable consumption, Shove (2003) asks how technologies and technical systems relate to the transformation of shared expectations, norms, and practices in environmentally sensitive domains, while arguing that prior structuring of users’ expectations has a significant role to play in how certain innovations take root, or what is deemed ‘normal practice’. The same might be said for certain food practices; we can look at how collective expectation shaped what was considered to be ‘normal practice’ with food. Some of the socio-technical and economic regimes and landscapes that shaped the older generations’ practices included: severely restricted access to prepared and processed food; limited income; rural locality; access to land for gardening; readily available knowledge and mentorship from family members; ease of access to canning equipment and storage; and an economy recovering from war.

The strong presence and influence of family

When asked about their memories, traditions and habits around their food knowledge, both now and in the past, almost all participants had stories that inherently linked close familial relationships and related experiences to the creation and perpetuation of their food practices. The desire to garden, cook, and can was fostered, in part, by the presence of a strong and influential ‘food role model’ in the family. The conditions needed to create, sustain, and extend not only the technical skills, but the appreciation and enduring desire for fresh, homemade, inexpensive and unprocessed food were often created in the context of the home, together with a particular family member. For example,

I first learned [to bake] from my aunt when I was 12. My mom never had time and never wanted to teach us, so my aunty did. My whole family loved my baking, so I think that's probably why I got into it.

Two women (a mother and daughter) boasted, as they proudly displayed their four hundred plus jars of canned goods, that they now have three generations of canners in their family.

Both of our granddaughters will help. Even our grandson, he's only ten, this last time he was peeling carrots and just lovin' it...so it's like a family thing. And then my husband will come home from work and he's in there like a dirty shirt...*we can as a family.*

Two research participants were sisters who had moved to Stony Plain from England over thirty years ago. One fondly recalled instances growing up in England where special relationships were built with their grandfather over food.

My grandfather was always very easy to be around, I was very close to him...you know, if he was in the garden, I was in the garden with him. We'd come in and he'd make a pot of soup and it was always really good soup, and I'm thinking that's probably why I enjoy it to this day.

When speaking about why she chose to do so much baking around Christmas time, another participant noted,

Well, it's not just for eating; it's for making something special and for keeping up Austrian traditions. It's something that I'm proud of and feel it's important to do, and pass along, because it makes me think of my parents. Also the baking with my daughter is something that we do together and it's just a bonding thing, and you have some wine and you make some cookies: it's just a good social thing.

These heterogeneous elements—bodies, tools, infrastructure, technical know-how, and social symbolism—are linked and culminate to influence and form the practices around traditional food knowledge. What is noteworthy here is the prominence of the familial relationships and the social and symbolic significance that it plays in contributing to the furthering of certain food practices.

Food knowledge and communities of practice

A close connection to family members and strong communities of practice serve to support the notion that practices require “changing populations of more or less faithful carriers or practitioners” (Shove et al., 2012, p. 63). The social networks formed among carriers act as crucibles in which practices are changed, re-produced, and transformed, as conduits through

which they flow and as containers that limit their diffusion and (Shove et al., 2012). It was evident that without the relationships and social networks formed in Stony Plain, many of the women would not be as active in their gardening, cooking, and canning as they are today. Communities of practice exist where there is a voluntary desire to share information, supplies, and knowledge among like-minded individuals (Wenger, 1999) and these different communities were very obviously an important part in the lives of the women we interviewed.

At one of the Women's Institute meetings, a large part of the evening was spent discussing thrifty and efficient ways of providing food for the local Christmas Craft fundraising bazaar that was being put on by the group. Some women of the older generation volunteer with the Multicultural Heritage Center's children's programs, such as teaching grade four and five students how to use local crab apples to make jams, jellies, and butters. Several of the women volunteer at the local community soup kitchen, where they would use their food preparation skills to make wholesome, nutritious meals for community members-in-need. The Stony Plain Farmers' Market was also a place where some of the participants prepared and sold their baking and canning to members of the community.

Besides these shared, larger community endeavours, many of the women talked of other relationships formed through friendships, religious groups, and community connections that reinforced their knowledge, ability and desire to garden, cook, and can.

Because of our religious group women would get together and learn basic skills of homemaking...that's where some of my gardening and my cooking and my canning skills would also come from. We would gather together and learn some of these skills from other people.

We used to have a baking day before Christmas when a bunch of ladies would bake each of their favourite Christmas cookies. It was like a big bake day, everybody would bring their own ingredients for their thing and at the end of the day we would divide it all up.

We have close friends, they always want recipes from me, or they come and celebrate the same kinds of things or take over our traditions. I think it has two effects: you integrate things from that kitchen or household, but also you become more aware of your own and you want to show your traditions.

For many women, it became very difficult to speak of food without also speaking about relationships in any discussion that was had.

Communities of practice are "groups of people informally bounded together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise" that "share their experiences and knowledge in free-flowing, creative ways that foster new approaches to problems" (Wenger & Synder, 2000, p. 139-140). In arguing that "practices are...the property of a kind of community created over time, by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise" (Wenger, 1999, p. 45), Wenger arrives at the conclusion that community and practice constitute one another. Not all sharing of information and materials were to solve specific or acute large-scale problems, but were to help 'solve' smaller and more ordinary dilemmas such as how to make celery grow, how to improve one's

homemaking skills, or to make up for a shortfall in canning ingredients. These activities may seem inconsequential, but they all contribute to the continuation and habitual performance of traditional food knowledge among members of the community of Stony Plain.

Conclusion

Undeniable changes have occurred in agriculture and agri-food industry over the last five decades. Rural populations have been severely affected by these changes, particularly when it comes to deskilling and knowledge loss, which is a growing concern among academics, practitioners, and the general public alike (Meah & Watson, 2011; Novek, 2003; Epp, 2001; Jaffe & Gertler, 2006). The women in this study, on the other hand, represent an example of how food skills and knowledge are actively being preserved—without explicitly being part of the so-called ‘alternative food movement’. Interestingly, they did not mention any resistance to the commercialization and commodification of food as motivation behind their practices of gardening, canning and cooking. Many of them expressed concern and dismay at the deskilling of their children and grandchildren’s generation, but did not give reasons why they thought this was happening. They were not politically motivated, nor did they have any type of explicit activist leanings influencing their traditional food practices. One woman who sold jam at the farmer’s market marketed her products as “free of the unpronounceable stuff”, but this was as far as it went. Their reasons for doing what they did with food were tied to pragmatic, cultural, and emotional reasons, reflected in the links between materials, meaning, and competencies of their food practices. This demonstrates the multi-faceted ways that food practices are manifested and can be understood, particularly here, where they have a deeply embedded, rich history in the lives of the participants.

The purpose of this research was to understand what factors motivate and enable the perpetuation of traditional food knowledge and its associated practices in a rural community despite significant barriers and changes in the food system. To do this we used a social practice theory framework, which is a relatively under-utilized approach in studying the sociology of food. By situating this research within a social practice theory framework, we attempted to move beyond the oft-used dichotomies of ‘producer’ versus ‘consumer’ to understand traditional food knowledge as a set of recursive social practices. Social theories like the one used in this analysis may not always lead directly to prescriptions for action; however, they do allow for other ways of understanding social change as well as social reproduction. This understanding is relevant because it presents a new approach to examining social issues and framing relevant social policy, subsequently affecting how different kinds of intervention are deemed possible, plausible, and worthwhile. For example, policy making is typically informed by theories of planned behaviour and models of rational economic action, but often informed by developments in sociological theory (Shove et al., 2012).

If we are to take seriously the recommendations from environmental social scientists seeking ways to develop and foster more pro-environmental behaviour (Røpke, 2009; Shove, 2003; Shove et al., 2012; Spaargaren, 2012; Warde, 2005) taking a practice-based approach to studying food may be a helpful analytical tool. More specifically, looking at the linkages among elements of a practice enables us to give a more convincing account of change and order (Braun, forthcoming). It also presents ways of describing and analyzing processes while accounting for more faithful, more consistent forms of reproduction (Shove et al 2012). Such an approach has been attempted in this study by looking at the links between motivational memory and the

normative expectations that existed when women in a rural community learned to cook, garden, and can. In addition to these cornerstone elements, we can also see how other elements—the technical know-how and skill; the objects and infrastructure (land, equipment, mentors); and the social and symbolic meaning (taking care of one another, pride, self-sufficiency)—come together to ensure and extend practices of gardening, cooking, and canning in this rural community. This highlights the importance of all three elements of a practice needing to be linked together to ensure that the practice is sustained.

It is useful to understand how practices recruit and maintain other practitioners vis-à-vis communities of practice. In the research presented here, it is perhaps most striking that significant familial relationships, friendships, community networks and communities of practice served as important pieces in the creation and retention of practitioners who desire to garden, cook, and can. It is very difficult to talk about food, and all of its myriad components, without also speaking of relationships.

This research indicates that it is important to look beyond producer and consumer categories in the study of food systems. By looking in the home or in the community, we can identify how relationships and related knowledge and skills develop around food; as well as how stories, experiences, and knowledge might be realized, shared, and then utilized to recruit people into the practice. It may also involve looking at what current normative expectations are for food practices, how they were formed, and how they might be used to modify, re-make, or eradicate other practices. Rural communities often have rich agricultural histories that may serve as a starting point for rekindling interest in traditional food practices, or serve as a connecting point between past activities and present. Organizations like the Multicultural Heritage Center, for example, have programs such as the elementary school guided field trips to surrounding community farms, the 'Back to Basics' days, the Farmer Appreciation Festival, and increasing numbers of gardening programs. The Centre recruits community seniors to teach, share, and inform the younger generation of community members.

As Shove et al. (2012) point out, practices die out if links between their defining elements are broken, or if communities cannot recruit or maintain practitioners. This research shows that there are strong links between elements in the various food practices and a strong community that sustains and reproduces those practices today. Important consideration should be given to the memories, stories, relationships and traditions that mould and define food practices both now and in the future as food activists and scholars continue in their quest of creating more just and sustainable food systems for the future.

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