

DELICATE FOOD-WAVES: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH TO FOOD-RELATED EXPERIENCES

Fransisca Hok-Eng Tan

University of Vienna, Austria

Universitaetsstrasse 7 A-1010 Wien, Austria

e-mail: fransisca.hok-eng.tan@univie.ac.at

ABSTRACT

Facing our ways of consumption it suggests itself that we are far ahead the basic rationale of food being solely for purposes of nourishing and fuelling the body. Nevertheless, it seems that in science it is presented only few and far between that there is more to it than nutrition. Accordingly, instead of looking through a micronutrient lens of explaining mechanisms, an experiential approach towards understanding food-related experiences shall illuminate the process rather than only the content of lived experience. This paper introduces an idiographic (within-person) mapping of food-related experiences and explores a potential framework for experiential data analysis and visualization heading towards a nomothetic direction. Envisioning this, though being still a long way off, shall highlight the promising approach of using methods of phenomenology to extend the current construction and account of food in research.

1 ON BEING DELICATE

Food Matters. It is “for nourishing, for fuelling the body, for building bones, teeth and muscle” (Lupton, 1996), but there is more to it than just nutrition. It is common to find concepts such as *food cravings* related to issues of obesity, depression, addiction or compulsion (Pelchat, 2002). Exemplary assessments include arbitrary rating scales, speed of consumption, physiological arousal or saliva secretion (McVay et al, 2012; Svaldi et al, 2010; Weingarten 1990). But on second thought this will evoke curiosity on how we actually define and operationalize hypothetical constructs that are hardly directly measurable. Being *delicate* is not just meant as denoting enjoyable food, likewise it hints at the sensitive subject matter of experience. Our thoughts, feelings, sensations and perceptions are tender to confabulations. Thus, illuminating the gap between lived experiences and what we usually label »thoughts«, and the construction of food and contemporary integration in science will be challenging but of vital relevance for the exploration of strategies for experiential data analysis and visualization.

2 STATE OF THE ART RESEARCH

Current research seems to set a focus on obesity as dominant public health issue and disorders such as binge eating (which was added in 2013 to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual

of Mental Disorders V). This resonates a rather negative connotation of matters of food. These investigated phenomena tend to use a mechanical approach to the human body (Guthman, 2012), i.e. by presuming the relevance of the energy balance model and thus focusing on caloric intake relative to expenditure, genetic predispositions (Gard & Wright, 2005) and such. Reviewing literature on phenomenological approaches to food-related experiences left me with a disturbingly mingled feeling of being in two minds. On the one hand there is a low tide of studies that problematize experiential advances and on the other a overwhelming flood tide of findings with a clear health impact, coined by buzzwords such as obesity epidemic and a weight loss culture (Glenn, 2013; Bidgood & Buckroyd, 2005 or Green, Larkin & Sullivan, 2009). Phenomenological approaches are applied to very delimited phenomena such as concrete symptoms in eating disorders (Thomas et al, 2011) and thus implement a strong connection to predefined indicator variables and underlying assumptions. Consequently a predominant mindset of something being of erroneous character crystallizes. Therefore the proposal of this paper, to use methods of phenomenology for investigating the structures of subjective experiences and consciousness, is of foremost importance. It is about revealing underlying constructs, rather than reproducing common conceptions available in the realms involving food and health in the multifarious disciplines in science.

3 A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

This research is constructing against the grain and delimiting itself from prior hypothesis. Instead of spotting gaps in existent theories it intends to problematize the account of food in science. This problematization as advocated by Freire (1970) sets the general methodological proposal of posing questions to challenge assumptions and deconstruct the phenomena. The specific method implemented was drawn from the Descriptive Experience Sampling (DES) by Russel Hurlburt (2006), a method for investigating random samples of inner experience in participants' natural environments. All co-researchers were trained to give their reports according to DES, thus getting familiar with the strengths of this phenomenological application prior to the actual data acquisition. One vital modification was necessary to allow the directed sampling of food-related experiences in the following. Thus, co-researchers were instructed to

document the onset of an experience involving food. This focus means a subject-driven selection and is connected to their awareness of this experience. To delimit from confabulation and artificial elaboration the focus on the onset was of high importance as well as the explicit avoidance of using biased concepts such as »food-cravings« by the researcher prior and during the period of data acquisition. Conclusively, this research included in-depth interviews with a set of 5 individuals without any diagnosed disorders related to food (due to the assumed proneness of patients with food-related disorders to report on their problematic relation to food). Each co-researcher was asked to document his/her food-related thoughts over a period of 24 hours. These samples were then discussed during in-depth interviews of max. 90 minutes (due to concentration and accuracy of reporting) and this overall procedure was repeated three times for every co-researcher. The explicatory interviews were transcribed and analyzed using open coding in grounded theory and the abstracted codes and categories visualized for each co-researcher. These structured illustrations serve as *idiographic* (Allport, 1937) map depicting food-related concepts significant to a co-researchers experience with the potential impact to render great value for individuals (i.e. with a problematic relation to food). Only in further course a higher purpose of developing strategies to analyze this phenomenal data is challenged, thus holding out to a nomothetic view. An early attempt to do so is proposed by the framework *food-waves*, which explores a first approach for analysis, structuring and visualization of phenomenal data. Evidently the two discrete products are complementary for gaining vital but different types of understandings.

4 IDIOGRAPHIC MAPPING OF FOOD-RELATED EXPERIENCES

We perceive the world around us as real, solid, tangible; we see, hear, smell, taste and touch things out there. But how close is the image of the world that we experience and create in our minds to the actual momentary descriptions that we give? And to what degree is it a perceived or embodied one, a product of cognition and emotion? Examples for discussing *how* we experience are modalities such as inner speech (McCarthy, 2011), mental imagery (Thompson, 2007) or concrete process categories such as colors or items visually popping out and drawing attention. Yet, people are rarely capable to state with certainty how they experience their daily life. Thus, the experiential data collected in in-depth interviews for this research allowed a first attempt to draw visual maps of aspects decisive for food-related experiences by deriving experiential concepts, categories and modalities formative to the several cases. The following selection of findings will illustrate a range of associated characteristics and modalities, offering a very reduced illustration of the structure and texture of reported incidents. (A full overview of the categories and according idiographic visual maps would unfortunately exceed the scope of this paper.) Starting from experiential reports a case-specific analysis and pattern finding is pursued by grouping codes to core concepts. These were structured into visual maps for reasons of structuring and build the basis for the case-

descriptions. Following I will discuss one case in more detail and then append significant divergences to other co-researchers.

In line with the distinctive statement »I constantly think about food« one co-researcher was characterized as the **Food-Lover** and volunteered for participation due to her self-attributed mindset that food-related thoughts take up a great deal of daily thoughts and experiences. She reported to be indecisive about her relation to food, sometimes thinking it to be “unhealthy” as well as considering the evaluation by close persons that advance the opinion that she is thinking too much about food. The discussed samples showed that 54% of food related experiences were initiated by *external input* and were either of visual nature, an olfactory trigger or actual food intake involved at the onset. Food-related experiences arising in thought and without any external aspect reported to be of importance, occurred in 46% of the samples. The concept of *check & decide* involved several types of modalities in 30% of the samples and was either of *bodily* or *emotional* nature but always experienced in correspondence to mental images. Her reports on *missing* showed to be an *emotional desire* or *want* that were mostly abstract as drawn from the reports occurring in 39% of the samples. Whereas a *wish* occurred in 30% of the samples, described as the co-researchers strong feeling of *wanting* something and was mostly located in the chest area. A *cognitive* notion to *push away* was the controlled disruption of negative food-related thoughts by engaging in active *cognitive* distraction from an *emotional* feeling. Reported Modalities included *informed knowing* (77%), *unsymbolized thinking* (31%), *emotions* (100%), *mental imagery of concrete locations or situations* (100%), *mouth sensations* (77%) or *memories* (77%). Overall the active engagement in *mental imagery* is interpreted as a vital act of creating extensive thought processes that are distinct for the participant’s way of experiencing daily life. Food related experiences seem to be consciously lived and showed a positive connotation and detailed elaboration, but with a critical integration and with a shift to a negative connotation due to cognitive reflection. This idiographic mapping gives a picture of probable modalities characteristic to this individual. Consequently, by highlighting the differences and similarities to other co-researchers I hope to bring about a broader topology of food related experiences.

Thus, comparing to **the Neutral** (with the mindset »food is food«) a strong *bodily* impact was discovered. Percepts such as *taste* and *mouth feeling* were manifest in all reported samples, and included concrete *awareness* of aspects such as *chewing, texture, tongue, teeth, palatine or throat*. She evidently showed a *bodily* consciousness regarding food-related experiences, opposed to a *cognitive* expression that seems to be a competing modality. Distinct to this co-researcher, **the Anti-Foodie** showed a majority of *perceptive* categories being of importance to food-related experiences. These were described in concepts of *blankness & awareness* (40%), *browsing & soft-eye* (40%), *visual popping in/out/up* (40%). His samples mostly involved situations of concrete food-related decisions, tasks and routines that are perceived as chore or labor with a rather negative connotation. The

integration seems to be excelled by *cognitive* tasks that need not be disrupted by *emotional* or *bodily* desires.

In contrary to that, *the Conscious* (characterized as thinking »There is a value to every food.«) echoes a positive value of food with a clear *emotional* access. The importance of *feelings* exhibited in reports discussing *emotional switches & flashes*, often giving the nudge to alert the co-researcher about the occurrence of a food-related thought. An overall *blend* and high awareness of *self* and *environment* was illustrated during the interviews. A comparison between subject points at the *cognitive* integration being subject-driven in this case, rather than triggered by external percepts as shows to be predominant with the *Food-Lover*.

The fifth and final co-researcher had a counterintuitive attitude towards food. Although describing to love food in line with the observation to show a very high appreciation of food he reported to rarely think about food. Being labeled as *the Unconscious*, his reports showed the relevance of abstract cognitive concepts such as *hunger* (75%), *time* (50%) and *anticipation* (75%), whereas typical modalities and process categories were *mental imagery* (58%) with a focus of visualizing, *simulating* (25%) visual and spatial characteristics (of situations) and *knowing* (58%).

Examining this short excerpt of results shows the richness and divergence of the manifold of descriptors that illustrate a co-researchers experience. Seeing that, this unknown realm of possibilities offers a strong indicator for the need of a framework for experiential data analysis.

5 FOOD-WAVES. EXPLORING A FRAMEWORK FOR EXPERIENTIAL DATA ANALYSIS AND VISUALIZATION

So far so good there is promising prospects for the extracted categories. But more than only hinting at the individual significances there is the wish to systematically analyze the phenomenal data to get a glimpse at the big picture. Adopting the idea of waves as denoting an oscillation that travels through space and matter accompanied by energy transfer, I want to introduce the framework *food-waves* that explores food-related experiences as amplification of internal and external perception, cognition & emotion. This shall emphasize that our experience is more than the percepts, the evident aspects of the content, of *what* happens in a situation. Following Hurlburt's argument in his work with patients with disturbances of affect it is a promising prospect to highlight the process of feeling and thinking, in sharp contrast to the most contemporary cognitive theories of psychiatric disorder that rather posit content categories as the cause for a disorder (Hurlburt, 1993).

Thus, instead of being content with the content of experience, and therefore the meaning and interpretation given in the interviews, it is aspired to get a grasp at *how* we sense (external and internal) cues and integrate them bodily, emotionally and cognitive wise. Exploring ways to structure the experiential data for analysis resulted in an early approach of the visualized framework *food-waves* (as depicted in Figure 1). The example shows categories of one particular co-researcher according to three groups that currently proposed to guide the early stages of analysis. The first one is *perception* (as the external percepts and internal

bodily cues, mainly visceral sensations), followed by *mood & emotion* (ranging from less specific valences to concrete topics and specific emotions and affect). The final group of characteristics focuses on *cognition*, covering process categories (such as attention, memory, awareness, visual imagery) and content categories (including subjective concepts that are rather unattended in the residual structure). It is subject to further exploration and offers a first stage for deriving a data-driven strategy for experiential data analysis and visualization. Nevertheless, fragments of the proposed framework need further exploration due to the complexity and dimensions clearly exceeding a 2-dimensional account, as well as alignment with present theories. Let alone the aspect of emotions raise a manifold of promising theories to be considered, starting from the selection of a definition for emotion (e.g. Plutchik, 1962), features of emotion (e.g. de Sousa, 2010) or the consideration of more concrete applications, such as contrasting the use of perceptual vs. cognitive mental verbs in recalling of emotional past (O'Kearney, 2006).

The potential classes of constructs (*perception, emotion, cognition*) envision the quest to explore ways to a structured manner of analyzing food-related experiences, guided by, but clearly not limited to the offered framework.

Though suggesting these kinds of quantifiers seem to lead to counterintuitive restrictions, this proposal is still contemplated as allowing individual case-based constructs and thus fostering a data-driven work-in-progress. While considering the categories as basic building blocks in line with the framework we strive for continuous refinement and extension. The higher aspiration for this first framework at hand lies in the systematic analysis of experiential data, approximating a promising access to this data by the asset of visualization. Suppose that the frequency of the *food-wave* could give information on a subjects experienced density of details or modalities and the amplitude offering the intensity or relevance of these peaks, one could easily spot case-based commonalities or identify typicality's and significances in the experiential data.

6 FUTURE OUTLOOK AND OTHER AREAS OF RESEARCH

Assuming that I have been able to act unbiased and predominantly bracket out prior concepts, I hope to have offered a first glimpse on some characteristics of inner experience. Nonetheless, intentions to draw clear conclusions from the data require further extensive research. The anecdotes of content and process categories outlined give critical footage to the understanding of how people experience and conceptualize food. By collecting this phenomenal data we are able to identify significances and patterns of subjective experience and might even direct commonalities between subjects in the future. This could be decisive to our understanding of experiences that shape normal to erroneous integration of food. To achieve this, there is the need for further engagement in both collecting experiential data and finding novel approaches to analyze the data. Vital to mark here is the strong explorative character of this research, with the proposed framework being an early

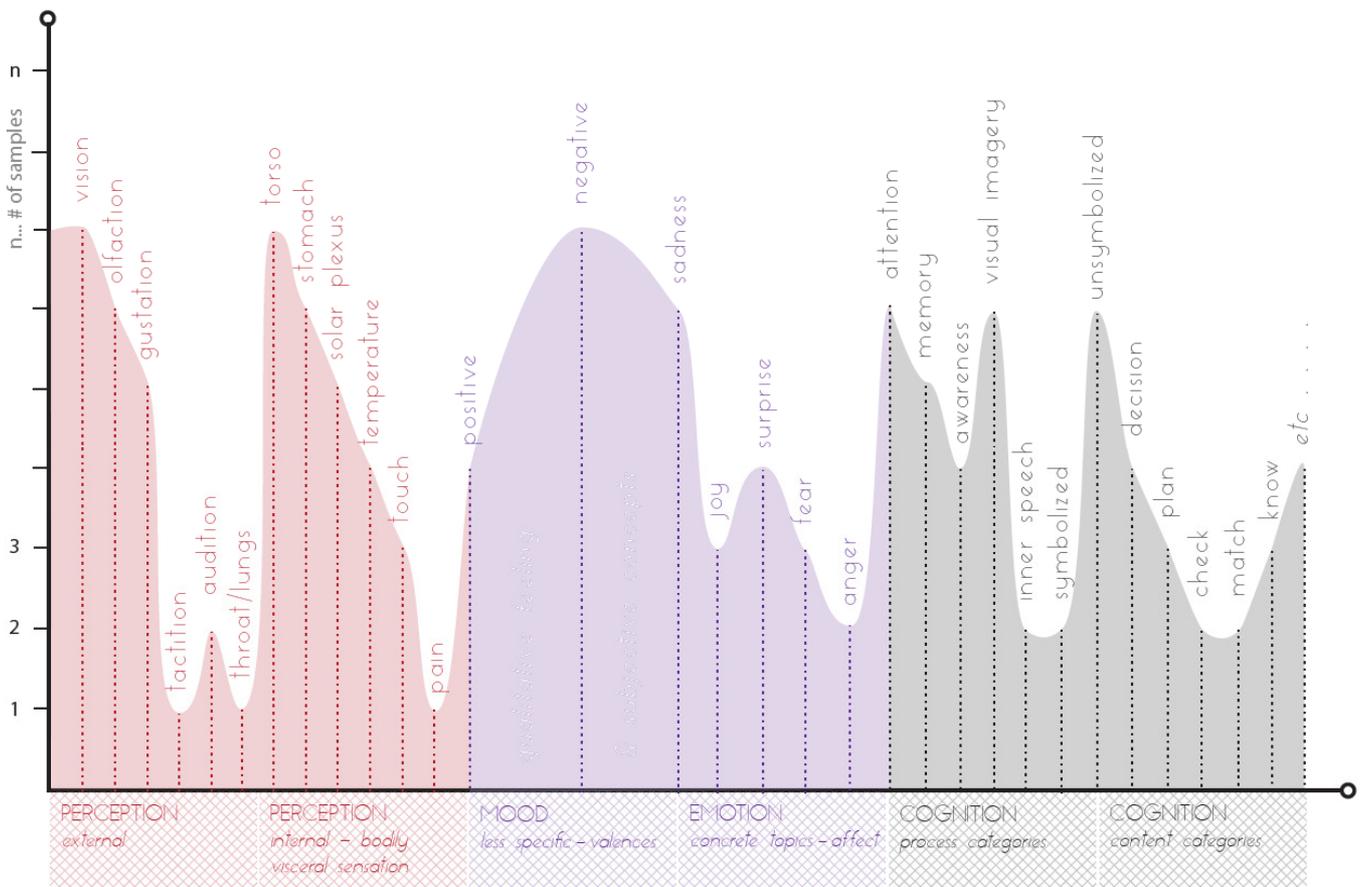


Figure 1: Food-Waves Example for the Food-Lover.

attempt to structure and visualize food-related experiences. Facing the need and great potential for interdisciplinary work for this underpinning I see promising collaborations with researchers coming from anthropology, etiology, ecology, gestaltism or aesthetics, to only name a few, and I remain with the uttermost hope for much more research to come.

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