The Community Table: Eating and Gender at Swarthmore College

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores approaches to and concepts of food held by students of binary gender identities on a college campus. Based on testimonies from focus groups and in-depth interviews with students attending Swarthmore College, this study was conducted during the Fall of 2015. The findings show more frequent dieting and concern for health in women, a trend established in existing literature. These results also suggest that men tend to interpret health in terms of nutrition rather than weight, viewing health as a matter of adding nutritious elements as opposed to restricting intake. Further, women were more likely to directly criticize gendered expectations related to body image but often did not relate these norms to their own experience of eating. Food was identified as a source of social connection and readily linked to culture and community. The analysis presented here provides a preliminary foundation for assessing gendered eating both on college campuses and in the United States more generally.
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The smell of burning toast emanated from the kitchen, rousing me from my sleep. Pushing the worry of a catastrophic disaster out of my mind, I rolled over and tried to catch a few more minutes of rest. I could hear my mother scream dramatically, as if she was worried the house would catch fire because of her miscalculation. Fearing the same myself, I prepared for the worst. Now that I could no longer ignore whatever had transpired, I ventured toward the smell, inching my way down the hallway and stairs. By the time I arrived in the dimly lit kitchen--my mother refused to turn on all the lights--the crisis seemed to be resolved. A charred piece of what was formerly whole wheat bread had been hurriedly tossed in the sink. I couldn’t understand exactly how someone could consistently burn toast when all it involved was turning a dial.

This was part of our typical morning routine. Sometimes it was the overcooked eggs and barely edible toast and sometimes it was dinner from the night before, or more likely a few nights before, thinly disguised as some sort of scramble. On better days there was no danger to the house or appliances. Usually we played it safe and just ate cereal.

By the time I was nine years old I was experimenting in the kitchen, discovering, to my disappointment, that potatoes and sole don’t cook at the same temperature. When I was twelve I was helping in the kitchen, watching cooking shows, and perusing food magazines and books every day. My typical high school routine included cooking dinner for my entire family, always before I had completed my nightly homework. Oftentimes, I would plan days in advance and go shopping for ingredients ahead of time, insisting that we seek out the most pristine and affordable produce. If I didn’t plan, I’d tell my mom what we were having for dinner so that she could pick up everything we would need. Preparing meals for my family became standard and I
began to build this task into my daily routine. I found chopping onions and garlic for pork ragu
cathartic and slicing a perfect heirloom tomato in the peak of summer is still one of my favorite
pastimes. My brothers still tended toward cereal in the morning, a dish that they often asked me
to prepare, but otherwise I had a part in almost every meal they and my mom ate for years.

* * *

Whether it be eating new things or cooking for friends and family, food is often at the
center of my life and everyday thought. In high school my mother relied on me to cook for
dinner parties and help entertain guests, showing hospitality through food. I enjoyed the
nurturing aspect of providing people with sustenance, especially when I had the opportunity to
put immense time and effort into dishes. Food became a primary way of showing care and was
vital to defining my relationships with others.

While I didn’t realize it immediately, I’ve recently thought of my mother’s cooking as a
blessing in disguise. It spurred my interest in food and cooking, ultimately pushing me to think
critically about consuming food. It made me more conscious of the work that goes into preparing
food and the importance of community associated with eating. For me, it’s now difficult not to
note differences in how people approach cooking and eating. These considerations inspired me to
view both topics from an academic standpoint. More and more I began to note what appeared to
be gendered habits and the kernels of dangerous views amongst my friends. I started to think of
my experiences as symptoms of damaging gender norms.

* * *

If we are to imagine a metaphor for the arena where these norms play out--and a table
might seem fitting--we may glean a deeper understanding of our objectives. So here we are at a
table of some description, a place where groups of people interact with the substances that
sustain them. We all sit down with a set of expectations, insecurities, and meanings associated with this act to nurture the body. We are faced with decisions regarding where we sit, what we choose to consume, what we choose not to consume, and how we think about these calculations. Sometimes, as on college campuses, long open communal tables with peers house these interactions. Other times this table is set for one, a family, or a small intimate group. These are all vastly different experiences, each imbued with a set of meanings beyond sustenance alone. We bring our identities to the table, our gender, race, class, sexual orientation, nationality, religion. When we leave this space to go about our day we often think about our choices, our next meal or our most recent meal, and these thoughts may shape how we think about ourselves and our relationship to the world. These value judgements, be they conscious or not, are powerful, providing an orienting force for deciding how best to approach daily life. Whatever one may think of the table, we, if we have the privilege to, inevitably come back to it at every turn in ever-shifting and varying ways. Sitting down to a meal is a daily event and a context, in many ways like numerous others, where social expectation plays out.

The particular character of the table is a product of both our personal experiences and the environment we inhabit. At this moment in the United States, we are confronted by overwhelming economic inequality that has implications for how approaches to food manifest themselves. While some reside in locations where finding nutritious and affordable food represents a daily challenge, the vast majority of us face an excess of options. This discrepancy is largely a result of class difference, injustices that lead some to struggle for sustenance while others have too much. Beyond that, we are at the same time constantly bombarded with imperatives to eat certain foods and approach eating in specific ways, messages of which mainstream media connected to large food corporations are the main purveyors. Simultaneously,
our bodies, and especially female bodies, are socially regulated, often in ways that directly contradict this abundance of food (Germov & Williams 2004:341). Interpretations and meanings related to eating are a product of these factors, unique to this 21st century United States. We reside in a specific time and place. Given our context, we experience a particular climate that dictates how people construct approaches, not just to eating but also to basic ways of being and interacting with others.

* * *

My personal interest in this topic stems from an intense love of food preparation, consumption, and the social basis of these activities. Recently, especially throughout my college career, I have noted discrepancies in the ways people prepare, talk about, and relate to food. This has spurred my interest in understanding how these differences operate and to what extent they can be understood within broader frameworks of social theory and systems of oppression. Of particular note to me is how people think about their relationship to food and to what degree this is a salient factor in decision making. Sometimes these calculations involve choosing whether or not to eat fries and other times judgments surround whom to include at meals. Although I have observed friends restrict food choices and justify their decisions to others, I have also seen people brought together by food and the pure enjoyment of consuming it. I have seen food act as a vehicle for sharing cultural heritage and community and I have seen the ways in which eating, depending on context, can simultaneously act as a source of giddy happiness and of extreme anxiety. This thesis is my attempt to make sense of these sometimes contradictory themes and the various meanings embodied by this vital activity.
Introduction

Sociological research surrounding the act of consuming food is as common as it is diverse, focusing on a range of demographic variables as well as cross-cultural perspectives. Within the undergraduate college setting, gender has been a particular area of interest for sociologists, but generally has leaned toward analysis of broad survey data to establish trends within this community (Mooney and Walbourn 2001, Boek 2012). This inquiry instead uses a qualitative approach and analyzes results drawn from a college campus within the frame of the existing literature on gendered eating. The analysis presented here approaches these topics through in-depth interviews and focus groups with individuals of varying gender identities. While this research is not focused on gender alone, this particular variable is highlighted here because it has such wide-ranging implications with regard to food consumption. In order to understand fully the insights I reached through this research, it is important to interpret my findings within a broader theoretical context.

THIS PROJECT

The goal of this project is to explore how individuals of differing genders relate to consuming food. This inquiry is related directly to issues of body image and spaces in which food is consumed. The focus of this research is to study individuals’ experiences relating to food and its consumption as a way of discovering how people think and talk about the activity of eating. I am primarily interested in food consumption because the topic raises issues of body image, restriction, health, and meanings beyond eating. As argued by Becky W. Thompson, food
consumption and gender do not exist in a vacuum but are rather connected to a range of other identities and interact with each other (1994).

Cross-cultural studies indicate that many groups of people have varying gendered views of different foods, sometimes clearly linked to other aspects of their societies. Everything from vegetables, to dairy, to meat may be gendered in any particular circumstance based upon who is allowed to produce, cook, and eat it. Cooking methods themselves have come to embody gender, containing associations with the elemental and symbolic nature of food (Lévi-Strauss 1966:32). Gendered spaces are sometimes arranged around food or the acts of preparation and consumption. Exclusion and inclusion are certainly aspects, but this interplay is sometimes much more complicated. While specific foods may not be entirely restricted to a certain gender, it is clear that many foods are gendered and that these properties vary according to a range of factors.

In my study I have not principally been concerned with the, admittedly gendered, topic of eating disorders. This field is rich and scholarly consensus indicates many more women have eating disorders when compared with men. My own investigation examines this topic only as it pertains to broader social constructions of health and the body. In many ways, it seems that disordered eating represents an expected outcome of more subtle societal norms and pressures regarding the raced, classed, and gendered body. The topic of these disorders is not of primary concern except insofar as it relates to gendered consumption expectations in general. In other words, I assume that eating disorders are an extreme consequence of societal and cultural expectations for people of any gender.

In my work, I refer to “men” and “women” with the understanding that gender is socially constructed. A broader study with more time and a larger sample population might be better able to shed light on those who do not conform to this construction. Such issues are, regrettably,
beyond the scope of this paper. Though much of this research was done in terms of men and women for the sake of simplicity, it is important to keep in mind that many individuals exist outside of these categories.

**PREVIOUS RESEARCH**

Food carries different meanings for different groups of people. For humans, all things are coded with meaning and consuming food is no different. Categories of food can be interpreted as meaningful in terms of a range of social categories, especially gender, race, and class. This coding of food as having specific social value relates to particular dishes and preparations, each of which is seen as having prescribed qualities within the United States (Sahlins 1976). In this country in particular, a developed country where access to healthy food varies drastically according to class, eating is also affected by subcultural norms. Of course this imbuing of objects with value judgements outside of their utility applies not just to food but to all goods, many of which have implications for and are influenced by gender and other axes of difference (Bourdieu 1984). Not only do foods contain these constructed meanings, but as such integral parts of the everyday human experience, they are also inscribed with social and cultural importance. Though these associations differ drastically across space and time, the existence of these meanings is cross culturally relevant. In the United States for instance, Carole Counihan notes that “American college students associate ‘light’ foods like salad, chicken, or yogurt with women, and ‘heavy’ foods like beef, beer, and potatoes with men” (1999:10). While associations may not always be this clear cut, this idea that foods take on gendered connotations is particularly relevant when considering how Swarthmore students discuss specific foods and the frequency with which they are brought up.
Food represents an economy of often unbalanced reciprocity and connection that divides men from women. That is, eating is an activity over which we tend to connect, giving and receiving not just food but duties related to facilitating eating. In relation to gender, eating appears in part as a manifestation of power structures, as eating habits often represent a site of division (Counihan 1999). These gendered distinctions are readily apparent on college campuses, as people from a range of diverse backgrounds struggle to navigate eating within a novel environment.

Counihan characterizes the relationship of people to food as a mode of exchange and connection, imbued with power and associated with conceptions of femininity and masculinity. Precisely because eating is so vital to being human, it embodies broader ways in which we interact with one another (Counihan 1999). She suggests that a problematic relationship to food is related to powerlessness more generally. Differing and often unhealthy relationships to food are interpreted as symptoms of gender inequality, played out within this sphere of eating. In this way food choices are cast as a tool for social control, gendered within the American cultural climate and disseminated through the mainstream media. This fact is also related to the regulation of female body image as well as the integration of patriarchal norms into women’s consciousness (Bruch 1997, Germov & Williams 2004). Counihan discusses this aspect too, arguing that the thin ideal perpetuated by mainstream culture both results in and is caused by social oppression and sometimes literal physical weakness. She highlights that “this ideal increases the distance between a woman and herself, exacerbating her conflicts and making it harder for her to be at one with herself--hence the obsession” (Counihan 1999:8). While gender-related food meanings are far from confined to women, many critics of the American eating landscape point to women as a group of particular concern.
Echoing my study population, the college campus has been a particularly common and fruitful site for research. Stacey Boek, in a study of factors motivating food choice, concluded that women were more likely to consider health when choosing food on campus and that nutrition was more likely a factor in dislike of particular food items (2012). Another survey-based study used an index of food avoidance to determine how college students tend to base decisions involving food rejection (Mooney and Walbourn 2001). This study noted “males were more uniformly concerned about the flavor of the food they avoid than about its ingredients, health or weight implications” (48). Much previous inquiry has used survey data to generalize about college campuses and beyond, generally coming to less than nuanced claims about certain axes of distinction within these communities (Boek 2012, Levi 2006). While not unimportant, these studies take a different perspective than the one taken here, seeking to establish general trends rather than uncovering specific anecdotal claims. That is, these studies tend to rely primarily on quantitative data to draw conclusions. Not only does this approach risk ignoring the ways in which real people think about food, it seems likely to obscure discrepancies based on intersectional identities. Though my data are not generalizable, my strategy seeks to reveal the ways in which people talk about food and interpret their individual experiences.

If we are to reach a thorough understanding of how people see food, it is important to recognize how experiences might affect individuals’ views. Becky W. Thompson’s work provides a good foundation for doing qualitative research with a more intersectional approach to food consumption and body image, especially exploring eating disorders (1994). Importantly, she criticizes broader ideologies behind stigmas surrounding weight and body image, connecting these to disordered relationships to food, appetite, and eating. This text is unique in its comprehensiveness, as it brings up issues of intersectionality that are often ignored in the
majority of more modern studies and thought. Her work is based on 18 in-depth interviews with women of various races and backgrounds and ultimately posits “that bingeing, purging, and starving, will continue until women’s access to racial, social, sexual, and political justice is ensured” (1994:2). She pushes for a more nuanced view of gender related to food and disordered eating, indicating that the notion of thinness as an ideal is far from universal (1994). Though the work presented here does not thoroughly address these intersecting forces, primarily because our scope is so limited, I find it essential to keep these complex interactions that Thompson identifies in mind.

Turning finally to social theory as part of my analysis, I seek to situate my findings within more general social structures. Pierre Bourdieu argues that we are socialized to our tastes; nothing about them is natural or inherent (1984:1). His framework is useful for understanding how preferences for foods and other goods are influenced by identity and position. Michel Foucault offers a different vantage point, discussing the evolution of regulation and power, ultimately concerning himself with how self policing comes about (1977). This point is critical to situating subjects like dieting and restriction as well as complicating our understanding of choice in general. Foucault’s theoretical framework shows how internal and external pressures may affect these decisions, ultimately allowing for more profound understanding of how people draw personal worth from eating. Lastly, Erving Goffman’s discussion of stigma provides a lens through which to understand how individuals make value judgements related to food, their own bodies, and the bodies of others (1963). His perspective relates to topics essential to this inquiry, such as body image, food choice, and health. Goffman’s framework is further useful as a viewpoint through which to see value judgments and emotional implications beyond the act of eating itself. Through putting my own research in conversation with these social theorists, I hope
to illuminate the role of food in our own self conceptions and relationships, ultimately linking it
to basic ways of being.

WHY IT’S IMPORTANT

One of the primary concerns of this research revolves around how people perceive food. This is, of course, intimately connected to what people consume and how they consume it. It is essential to explore people’s thought processes about food because eating is such a vital part of everyday human experience. Interviews are particularly useful for exploring this facet as they deal with the experiences of the individual and have the power to highlight slight differences in thought processes. This thought or lack of thought about eating may also relate to the space in which food is consumed. How are social spaces organized around consumption and what can eating add to these experiences? To what extent does eating in these spaces add or interact with their gendered nature? On college campuses, food and consumption in general are essential to the choreography of events and to various student groups. In fact, sometimes food is offered as an incentive for attending everything from lectures to interest meetings. It seems logical that this fact might bias participation based upon how much people value food offerings. With this in mind, one could reasonably conclude that food and gender might interact differently in varying social circumstances.

It is quite clear that there is a large range of experiences and opinions of food that are likely informed at least in part by gender. Possibly it is the interaction of gender and other facets of identity that leads to one’s relationship to food. Equally, upbringing and socialization more generally may prove to have a greater impact than more discrete variables. It is undeniable that there are differences along gendered lines, but it is thus far difficult to disentangle exactly how these variables manifest. Perhaps more interesting is the ways in which this gendered arena
interacts with other social factors, and how this relationship potentially affects people’s actions. Though my sample population may not be representative of the entire national population, I hope that this research might be suggestive, providing some idea of the ways in which people think and talk about food consumption.

The first chapter of this thesis outlines methodology, explaining how participants were sampled and providing information about interviews and focus groups. Chapter Two examines ways of conceptualizing food, focusing on dieting and restriction as well as the contrast between food as fuel or something to be enjoyed. Chapter Three is concerned with the opposition of taste and health, an area where addition or subtraction of foods to achieve health was discovered to be highly gendered. Chapter Four is about meanings beyond eating, particularly emotional effects related to consuming food and interviewees’ awareness of gender. Finally, Chapter Five explores social and cultural meanings, highlighting the importance of food in defining identity and community.

This work is particularly important because of how vital eating is to the human experience. Further, eating has implications not just for physical health, but also for mental well-being. It represents an expression of cultural identity within social spaces and can be an extremely meaningful and orienting force. Uncovering how individuals interact with food on a daily basis is an important part of ensuring that people can approach it positively and meaningfully.
1. Methods

The research presented here was motivated by the question: “How do college students understand and think about food consumption and how is this informed by their gender identities?” I sampled students intentionally to achieve a broad sample and analyzed responses utilizing qualitative methods. I primarily performed this research through in-depth interviews with students at Swarthmore College, a small liberal arts school southwest of Philadelphia, PA. Interviews took place at a location of the respondents’ choosing, mostly on campus for the increased convenience of both parties. These locations were always extremely private in order to maximize the comfort of interviewees and for most effectively documenting conversations.

INTERVIEWS

Questionnaires preceded interviews, asking for interviewees to volunteer open ended information about race/ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, as well as a range of other demographic factors. These served as possible axes of distinction and aided in the ability to establish trends during analysis.

I recorded interviews on both a password protected smartphone and audio recording device to maintain backup copies of all audio material. I kept information in a secure location and included only minimal identifying information. I primarily directed questions toward food and gender, but probing proved necessary to acquire richer responses and explore relevant lines of inquiry. This method provided an adequate cross section of the campus community, encompassing as much diversity as possible, especially in terms of race and gender identity.
The interviews followed a relatively structured format, including subsections to orient the interviewee and prevent discomfort. To maintain consistency, I kept the general format and order of questions as uniform as possible for all participants, except in cases where questions were found to be ineffective, uninteresting, or off topic. In these cases, I amended interview questions as minimally as possible in pursuit of richer responses. Additionally, I provided room for improvisation and probing into topics of particular interest or complexity. This proved to be an essential tool for evoking deeper and more descriptive response as well as guiding the conversation in a natural and comfortable manner.

I collected the bulk of demographic and personal detail at the beginning of each interview, in survey format. I collected this information in an open-ended manner, allowing participants to interpret questions for themselves rather than being directed. In addition to providing a more interesting and full understanding of these factors, I used this format in order to maximize comfort for those who may have fallen between traditional categories. I stored these details electronically in a secure document on a password protected computer. I provided thorough consent forms, indicating clearly the voluntary nature of participation.

PARTICIPANTS

I drew participants from the community, using an intentional snowball sampling method stemming from an acquaintance of the researcher. I selected participants intentionally to increase diversity of known demographics. These interviewees were between 18 and 22 years of age, and of varying sexual orientations, racial, class, ethnic, and gender identities. As college students, these participants were unique, and were chosen to help elucidate the relationship of higher education to gendered differences in eating.
JUSTIFICATION OF METHODS

For this inquiry, I thought open-ended interviews to be most appropriate because of the possible scope and novelty of this research. As an undergraduate thesis, my study of gendered eating provides only a small-scale statement about a piece of a collegiate community. Within the confines of this framework, large-scale surveys would have still provided little generalizable information concerning trends across gender and other demographic factors. Interviews, on the other hand, allow for information covering the experiences and thoughts of the individual, speaking to specific ways in which people think about eating and issues of gender. Another advantage of this strategy is its novelty, as many survey-based studies in this vein have been done on college campuses (Boek et al. 2012, Levi et al. 2006). Still many of those studies involving interviews concern eating disorders rather than larger trends (Becky W. Thompson 1994). Further, others have investigated trends of food preference and indicated profound differences in the sociological factors contributing to food choice (Carole M. Counihan 1999). It seems appropriate, then, to put these findings to use and explore the diverse ways in which people conceptualize relationships to food in practice.

Though this inquiry is, in many ways, novel, it relates very well to and extends previous research concerning eating and gender. The methods employed here follow a similar format to those used by Hernandez-Hons and Woolley in their study of women’s experiences with emotionally related eating (2012). This study was done using interview material from eight diverse female participants who identified as emotional eaters. The study was small because of a reported redundancy of information, a constraint not readily problematic for the purposes of this inquiry.
2. Ways of Seeing Food

Two basic ways of seeing food emerged from conversations--restriction and fueling--to explain how individuals made choices related to eating. For many, restriction was rooted in the idea of self-policing, as oftentimes participants reported putting pressure on themselves to eat in certain ways. In general, the thinking behind these acts invokes Michel Foucault, who argues that actors become “caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers” (1977:201). He states that power acts in visible and invisible ways, operating in all facets of daily life and unconscious behavior (1977). In terms of approaches to eating, this perspective means people might be likely to self-restrict without recognizing the power structures that lead them to do so. Accordingly, interviewees seldom mentioned pressure to restrict food intake from any outside forces, often citing body image as personal motivation.

While some, especially women, mentioned dieting or restricting eating, this was generally framed as a personal choice and not a product of targeted social pressure. Insecurities associated with physical properties, on the other hand -- stigmatized as “abominations of the body” -- were readily identified as problematic, especially by women (Goffman 1963:4). In this way, an awareness of social acceptance based on appearance was observable. When physical attributes were discussed, fatness and weight gain were universally interpreted as negative. And while eating was connected to body image, there was little sense that any force behind restricting food was external.
DIETING AND RESTRICTION

While some of the men revealed that they were more or less health conscious at different times, none had ever formally dieted. Two of seven had formerly been vegetarian for ethical reasons, but most had relatively unrestricted diets. One man had tried a very regimented P90X diet and exercise plan in high school but noted that it was not sustainable. Strict dieting among the sampled women was also fairly uncommon, though most had tried vegetarianism and one was on a very regimented “paleo” diet—which consists of mostly fruits, vegetables, meat, and fish. The rationale behind “paleo” is that it represents how humans ate in prehistoric times and is therefore a more natural and possibly healthy way of eating. Although current dieting was uncommon, some indicated that they had tried dieting in the past or gone through phases in which restriction was more important. The women were more apt to reject meat on a “carnal” level or avoid items that would make them “feel physically heavy.” While some women had fairly regimented diets, going as far as to ritualize “eat[ing] the same thing at the same time every day,” this was fairly uncommon. One noted often skipping meals or forgetting to eat, especially in the mornings. The woman who skipped breakfasts recounted being around people with disordered eating, saying that it made her more “conscious of [dieting].” This regimented eating was not framed explicitly in terms of restriction. Though she was not extremely strict about staying on plan, another reported counting calories on a fitness application and being “allowed” a certain number of calories. People of both genders appeared to restrict, but women more commonly had experienced dieting or quantified the amount that they ate, suggesting an enhanced concern about eating too much.

The potential danger surrounding dieting appeared more salient for women, a group that also more readily mentioned disordered eating. One woman was “really glad we don't have like a
college wrestling team...where there are weight limits for people, weight classes, I think that would make that issue a lot more prevalent at least a lot more dangerous for a lot of people.”

This idea of explicit danger was less important to the men, who noted strange eating habits but did not see them as inherently problematic. They were more likely to laugh off discrepancies in diet like people eating “the weirdest shit” or following strict plans like the paleo diet. This might reflect amount or kind of thought that members of these groups dedicate to variation in eating habits.

A few women noted stigma around body image and associated eating more strongly with its long-term physical impacts. One characterized her relationship to dieting in high school:

I think I was doing it because I don't always handle body change well and I was I think I was just growing but I was honestly afraid to. I wanted to stay the way I was in 6th grade which is irrational, like that’s what I would think. And so I was like the only way that I'm going to do that is if I really don't eat like a lot. It wasn't like I was...it wasn't that I wasn't eating anything. I went onto like the my pyramid and it was like oh how much am I eating for like my height and my weight and how much can I eat such that I don't you know like under fuel myself but I'm just getting enough? Yeah and that didn’t actually work out just because in the end I’d go through like periods oh I'm doing really well but then I’d get really hungry and then I’d just...it didn’t work out.

This individual articulated a concern for bodily form echoed by most of the women and related to restriction of food. This is evidenced by the frequency of dieting related to physical appearance and a desire “to be skinnier.” Whether implicit or more clear, the women interviewed here expressed concern for physical appearance and connected that to eating. While this sentiment was not completely absent in the men, there was only one man who clearly linked these things. Implying a difference in concern for body image, this discrepancy points to a more pronounced awareness or experience of stigma related to physical appearance.
These men tended to create balanced plates through adding rather than subtracting, more often interpreting healthy eating to mean eating nutritious things rather than restricting unhealthy ones. One man characterized his restriction of foods, “the extent of my dieting is like a plate of like non-green things and I should probably have something green. Like I guess it’s a color diet. If I have a bunch of greasy brown things I should probably put something green on there.” This notion may reflect a desire to be well nourished in terms of nutritional value rather than restricting calories. Men were more likely to conceptualize eating well in terms of balance as opposed to restriction. The general absence of dieting observed in men may reflect diminished social pressure to conform to an ideal body. An emphasis on thinness for women is not universal but it is extremely prevalent in the United States and affects how women approach food (Thompson 1994:9). With readily apparent differences in concern for body image, these participants corroborate this idea.

While these women did not seem overtly likely to actively restrict intake of ‘unhealthy’ items, they certainly did not conceive of adding food as something that might be more healthy. In contrast to the men, women were more likely to see restriction or limitation of intake as a primary tool for remaining healthy. Dieting, though not extremely common at the time of interviews, involved restraint as opposed to addition. These differences may be attributable to expectations for women surrounding dieting that encourage dissatisfaction with body size (Counihan 1999:11). This, as Counihan argues, is a specific manifestation of subordination.

The frequency of dieting in women through restriction is readily observable not just on Swarthmore’s campus but in many communities. In my experience, women often experiment with extreme diets that may or may not be permanent. Many women I interact with daily have restricted carbohydrate heavy foods entirely or refuse to eat dessert for any reason. Still others
never drink soda or other drinks with calories. Echoing the findings in participants, I have found that dieting is extremely common in women, especially those at Swarthmore. While my experience with men’s eating habits is more limited, I have observed dieting within this group much less frequently.

**FOOD AS FUEL AND EXPERIENCE**

One of the primary objectives of this project was to understand how people view the act of eating. Whether discussed explicitly or not, this proved to vary for most people based upon anything from mood to timing to occasion of eating. Depending on context, people of varying identities saw food as fuel (something necessary to get through the day) or experience (something to be enjoyed and cherished). One man noted that his view of food or ability to savor food varied directly with time spent doing other activities, especially homework. Though he also noted that food choices were important to his everyday routine, another expressed a similar sentiment, “when I joined athletics at the varsity level I got a lot better about eating more meals because I was like my body needs this I'm hungry a lot more.” For these particular men, the primary motivation behind consuming food was fueling the body and warding off hunger. Though both clearly enjoyed eating for its own sake to a certain extent, they identified situations in which food was primarily a source of fuel.

Most participants, however, did not seem to view food primarily in these terms, instead remarking on their appreciation of good food. One woman directly critiqued this interpretation of food as fuel alone:

It is interesting to me that...so I was talking to some people you know lately and one of them was like I more or less get resentful every time I get hungry because...I have to feed myself...I mean you hear things about. You know about soylent? Yes this is an incredibly bland nutritionally complete milkshake just drink it and I'm like that’s horrific...I realize the way I am doing is inefficient, it’s
more expensive, it uses more resources, but there’s a joy to it and there’s a
classer to it. All of these other values and meanings that I can associate with it
that I will not get if I drink a beige colored slightly salty protein shake. That’s not,
those are not the same things for me so I can recognize and understand that there
are people who don’t care about food and I’m okay with that. I don’t get it. I stay
away from them.

In this case the interviewee seemed to reject the point of view that food can be seen purely as
fuel in certain situations, as it was inextricably linked to broader meanings for her. While this
view did not preclude her from thinking of food in terms of its health benefits or detriments, she
did overall appear to value the act of creating food and taste above other factors. Another woman
expressed generally seeing food as something to be enjoyed noting “when I eat good food or
have the potential to eat good food it makes my day a lot better.” In her eyes eating was
enjoyable and sustenance seen as something to be experienced.

While few brought up conceptualizing food as fuel unprompted, those who did were men.
One communicated that he saw eating as fueling mostly with reference to competitive athletics
while another cited the intense academic workload. Even those who reported thinking a lot about
the balance of their diet seemed to think of eating as enjoyable. All participants saw food as an
activity in certain circumstances and, to differing degrees, sought out specific food-related
experiences. Fuel and experience were not mutually exclusive and coexisted in the outlooks of
many interviewees. This may indicate that interpretations of eating are context-dependent and
often overlapping.
3. Health and Taste

Perhaps the most salient inquiry for both gender groups was the discussion of health versus taste, a topic interspersed throughout conversation even without direct questioning. Pierre Bourdieu in particular confronts the idea of taste, though he uses this term in a slightly different manner. Taste for Bourdieu represents socially determined preferences for certain cultural goods, a definition that certainly encompasses food. He argues that these preferences are a direct product of socialization and that choices “according to one’s tastes is a matter of identifying goods that are objectively attuned to one’s position” (1984:232). Bourdieu’s understanding of taste is vital to interpreting this dichotomy between health and enjoyment of food as it points to underlying determinants of choice between these two criteria for dietary decision-making. In particular, it suggests that the interaction between prioritization of health and gender is a product of socialization. Additionally, as Marshall Sahlins adds, “the goods stand as an object code for the signification and valuation of persons and occasions, functions and situations.” In this way socially created meanings come to embody very real effects, many of which have important implications for people’s lives.

Of primary concern in this inquiry was the notion of health, prioritized to various degrees across interviewees. Health seemed most generally to be conceptualized at either something that would preserve body image or something that would make one feel good, either emotionally or physically. The term “health” was used extensively, though this idea itself was also talked about more implicitly. All interviewees appeared to value the idea of health to some extent, although people approached these various ideals of health in diverse ways. Subjects, though they thought of themselves as more or less healthy based on differing criteria, all did at least seem to have
some overlap is conceptions of health. Another layer of difference lay in how much time and emotion people invested in their ability to achieve their personal ideal.

For both groups, health and taste were set in opposition, but especially for men, unhealthy foods were consumed without too much thought. For these men, meals were about striking a balance, a task that seemed generally to favor taste. One man characterized this task, “I care about how it tastes...I would like to enjoy my food and sort of secondary to that is it should be reasonably healthy.” Health in this case is characterized as a background goal of sorts, something desirable but not essential to the eating process. In contrast to some degree, these women seemed more concerned with a holistic approach. One woman was “definitely conscious of not eating shit,” foods that she defined as “fried greasy things,” although dessert was seen as more acceptable. One remarked on “the overall health value, like nutritional value of the food” as a determinant of choice over carbohydrate-heavy foods. While both men and women asserted some notion of balance between healthy and unhealthy foods, men were more likely to forgo health. Health and taste were commonly viewed as contrasting factors that could be sacrificed to varying degrees for one another. Further, both focus groups tended to bring up foods that were at one extreme or another in terms of health--either they were very healthy or very unhealthy--and used these as descriptive examples.

PARTICULAR FOODS

Though this was not always a focal point, it was notable what particular foods were mentioned with regards to health or its opposite. Here there was often an explicit dichotomy between meat, fried foods and vegetables as categories. In terms of their own eating habits, men tended to highlight more greasy options like spicy chicken patties with cheese, fries, cookies, and grilled cheese. At the same time, the men talked extensively about ensuring that they eat
vegetables, also consistently lamenting the lack of fresh options on campus. One asserted his value of fruit: “going to [the grocery store] and buying apples there, grapes and strawberries, it’s amazing.” Another explained that “good vegetables” were both extremely rare and important. However, aside from mentioning fruits, vegetables, and sometimes carbohydrates, one man sought to create a balanced plate which adapted to his level of physical activity. Interestingly it was men who brought up carbohydrates as being healthy, perhaps reflecting some notion of balance. One man thought “grains are really healthy...I think oatmeal and granola and things like that are very healthy,” though he expressed misgivings about this position. This rather strict categorization of foods is unsurprising, as participants often used descriptive examples to convey ideas about health. Perhaps contrary to knowledge of food associations, particular items were not coded explicitly as gendered (Sahlins 1976). However, men did seem to gravitate toward mentioning unhealthy foods and were less likely to view eating these foods as negative.

Though overall opinions of what foods and habits are healthy were fairly standard across interviewees, I noted some small discrepancies. Most interviewees brought up vegetables as the primary healthy food group and carbohydrates or fried foods as unhealthy. Of her rejection of carbohydrates, one woman noted “my dislike of too many carbs [is] probably deep-seated in like carbs are bad for you, carbs are the enemy,” a notion that she connected to her socialization as a woman. One woman was more specific, indicating healthy foods were “dark leafy greens [and] anything that’s not fried...a little bit of frying is fine.” Another was a little more stringent, identifying “lightly cooked vegetables or raw...I guess things that are probably lower calorie.” This woman was the only person to bring up calorie content unprompted when asked what she considered healthy. For this individual, an appeal to calorie count may indicate enhanced strictness surrounding food or a desire to quantify health.
PERSONAL VS. OTHERS’ CHOICES

One particularly productive and interesting line of questioning concerned what factors led participants and others to make different decisions about food. Taking their first response to be the most salient of all factors mentioned yielded interesting insights into how people conceptualize the primary ways in which they and others eat. This analysis showed the extent to which people assumed that their experiences were standard. In fact, what people viewed as important considerations for others frequently differed from personal values. The privileging of certain incentives over others was often left uninterrogated by interviewees. While responses included cost, convenience, and cultural factors in a broad sense, taste and health were particularly frequently mentioned and were more closely examined.

A marked difference in discussion of how people think about decisions regarding food generally versus on a more personal level was especially notable for the women queried here. While one woman contended that “cultural things” and an “awareness of what you’re paying” in monetary terms were important to people generally, others argued that factors like gender and athletics had a primary influence on food consumption habits. Interestingly, one woman even brought up the topic of perception, taken to mean what other’s would think of eating habits, a factor corroborated by a couple others. She noticed “that [she’d] had experiences where if one person is getting dessert…or if one person wants dessert but no one else is getting it that person won’t get it.” In this case she noted a kind of policing not readily apparent for the men interviewed here. Further, others noted a similar experience with fries in the dining hall, noting that other people, especially women, avoided eating them alone. Expectations related to specific foods acted as a source of stigma from outside actors, implying some sort of social failing or
shame (Goffman 1963). Connecting food choices to perception was present in only a couple women’s accounts, suggesting a greater concern for the opinions and judgments of outsiders.

When asked about personal decisions connected to food, women primarily cited taste and physical effects as most important, both factors absent in their evaluation of choice in general. One favored “what seems yummy” while others valued foods that made them feel “energized” or things that “feel good to eat.” This discrepancy might reflect a disconnect between personal eating habits and more broadly held ideas. Women barely mentioned taste when asked about eating in general, but volunteered this as an important factor for personal consumption. Simultaneously, women seemed more likely to speak negatively of greasy foods as well as meat, and seemed to restrict these foods more actively. Health, mentioned sparingly by the interviewer, was readily brought up by both men and women. However, as the pressures surrounding health were more salient to women, their comments diverged greatly.

For the women in particular, there was a sense that a desire for tasty food had to be reconciled with its being less healthy, that there was some trade off that might inhibit enjoying food. One woman indicated that of utmost importance was “how good it’s going to taste in the moment and then occasionally how you’re going to feel later after you eat it,” while she thought that personally “sometimes it’s just what I feel like eating at that time and I’ll be like whatever I don’t really care about the consequences right now. I’m gonna pretend that like everything is equal healthiness and just get what I want.” While this does align well with her statement about people in general, it is worth noting that she feels the need to justify this decision for herself, recognizing that the health of her food in some sense should be of concern. Another woman echoed this to some extent in her personal values, asserting “[her] dream for Sharples [dining hall] is that they’ll have to put calorie counts on their food...so that it would be easier to know
exactly...cause I appreciate the ingredients.” This analysis does not seem to be only about the explicit mention of what quality ingredients are involved but rather the nutritional value and calorie content of dishes. Even more interesting is the fact that she identifies two groups of people who approach food in varied ways, based in many ways upon participation in athletics. She asserts, speaking of the suggestion board in the main dining hall, “if you just look at the napkin board you can see that dissonance between the two factions and I consider them factions,” people who “are like can you have more pop tarts at essies versus the people who are like, can you get kale?” In terms of others it was implied that this was based primarily either on taste or nutrition, but she did not elaborate on those outside of these distinct groups. The idea that taste was gained at the cost of nutrition or feeling good about choices was more pronounced in women, suggesting women have more misgivings about consuming unhealthy foods.

Men also tended to turn to broad factors like athletics, sex, dietary restrictions, and even mood when discussing decisions about food made by others. When asked personal questions, men tended to explicitly privilege taste over health, generally agreeing that taste was the most important aspect of food-related decisions. With perhaps a more consistent analysis compared to some women, one man thought that in general food related decisions were connected to food availability. Noting this, he said, “proximity to a certain extent so like how close you are to something” was important for people and that personally he valued convenience. For this individual, other important factors included cost as well as mood. In this context, mood was described not clearly in terms of emotion, but as a function of how often a dish was eaten. It was interesting that ease of access was so important to both this individual and others within the college community. Perhaps this was more important within a college context because students tended to be so busy with schoolwork. This individual noted a similar trend of snacking on what
was convenient in high school when he was particularly busy. Men overall were less likely to appeal to health in making food-related decisions and were more consistent when comparing factors important to them and those important to others.

HEALTH: ADDITION AND SUBTRACTION

Another concept that came up repeatedly in focus groups and interviews was differing notions of what constitutes a healthy plate. While the women tended to think of restriction of calories and unhealthy foods as most important, the men were more likely to interpret health as adding something to one’s plate. For the men interviewed, this interpretation of health was not so clear cut. One man felt that “having a quote unquote balanced diet [meant] hav[ing] a vegetable,” an act that he frequently and actively seemed to remind himself to do. He seemed to think of health in terms of ensuring some sort of nutritious element, noting that he frequently ate rather processed and unhealthy snacks. He appeared to view this adding of healthy elements as a sort of chore, adding “almost things that are a little bit deprived of flavor are healthy for you.” For some men, health was viewed as a chore and the consuming of healthy foods was done because it was supposed to be good for them.

In contrast, another man interpreted health to be “a balance between a meat of some[thing] that’s not super fried or super...so like a lean meat or a fish and then a serving of vegetables maybe fruit.” In this person’s case, health is viewed more holistically, as a balance between food groups. This echoes the sentiments of the women’s focus group as well as the women interviewees, interpreting health more as a function of overall intake than nutrients alone. This individual was also more cognizant of nutrition generally to a greater degree than most participants, frequently mentioning calorie counts and food groups. In many ways this individual
represented an outlier, speaking about food in a manner akin to the women. His testimony highlights the heterogeneity of views for both gender groups.

While the women did not all directly invoke calorie counts or taking out elements when asked about how they approached food, this group seemed to have a more restrictive view of what was healthy. This generally included fruits and vegetables and, to a lesser degree, lean proteins and eggs. One woman identified a type of familiar diet involving the restriction of portion size while another actively tracked calorie counts and seemed generally concerned with macronutrients. Two men recounted not thinking much about nutrition before college and not growing up with an emphasis on eating healthy foods. One interpreted this as meaning “actually being aware of what I'm eating instead of just like scarfing what’s around.” This contrast reflects a greater concern for health of foods and an enhanced strictness surrounding foods considered unhealthy. The trend of women’s enhanced concern for healthy food was also observed when participants were asked about dieting and restriction. Additionally, this finding corroborates Mooney and Walbourn, whose study of college students rejecting food found that men were more concerned with taste than factors like health or ingredients (2001:48). Given these lines of evidence, it seems likely that women spend more energy thinking about making healthy choices and are more likely to sacrifice enjoying meals in favor of health.
4. Meanings Beyond Eating

In this section I discuss meanings beyond eating, particularly looking at emotions associated with food and explicit awareness of gendered eating norms. Like any other activity, social norms influence the ways in which people approach consuming food. Contained within these assumptions are value judgements, pressures that have real effects on interactions with food and others. As Erving Goffman puts it, “a necessary condition for social life is the sharing of a single set of normative expectations by all participants, the norms being sustained in part because of being incorporated” (Goffman 1963:122,123). These norms have important implications for how individuals approach perceived transgressions and conceptualize eating as connected to social position. As beings influenced by status categories, humans may act according to expectations linked to these identities, adjusting modes of living according to privileged or sub-dominant categories (Weber 2014). Especially concerning negative associations, emotions linked to eating in this way are therefore associated with stigma.

NEGATIVE EMOTIONS: REGRET AND GUILT

Both men and women tended to draw a sharp distinctions between regret and guilt, favoring the term regret to explain feelings surrounding negative experiences with food. Though it was difficult to disentangle emotionally from physically based negative feelings, these seemed at least partially to be bodily for both groups. There was some indication that people distinguished between emotional and physical experiences however, and these perspectives could be inferred from testimonies.

Though both parties complained about the negative physical effects of eating at the main dining hall, men generally limited themselves to complaining about bodily discomfort. One man
pointed to overeating as the cause of gastrointestinal distress, “by the time I leave Sharples I am pretty unhappy and like...later when I'm trying to do homework the pain sets in. It really just sticks in there.” Others echoed a similar physical discomfort after eating french toast sticks “they taste really good but like God I hate myself when I eat them...I don't feel good about myself as a person after eating those.” The feeling this man expressed had to do with physical distress, as he did not connect any emotion to it and laughed as he was speaking. This experience in particular was classified as regret, explicitly not guilt, but this did not seem to be clearly connected to any broader emotional response. Overall the men seemed to reject the notion of guilt more decisively, indicating that it was physical rather than emotional distress that caused problems.

Although these men did not characterize their relationship to food in terms of guilt, they did profess to have a somewhat emotional relationship to it, noting that their mood might change drastically based upon what the dining hall served. However, this reaction seemed primarily about the quality of the options in terms of taste rather than being connected to anything more profound. Though one man explicitly indicated that offerings did not change his mood drastically, he also noted that looking at the meal schedule “definitely gets me like oh sweet that's something to look forward to or like oh man.” When asked if the type of food offered changed his mood, one man simply answered “absolutely” while another was “usually just so downtrodden about what [he was] expecting that [he was] actually usually more happily surprised.” While they also complained about the general state of food on campus, these men tended to draw positive feelings from food. Many noted that specific offerings were connected to mood and that they often found that eating “ha[s] to do with your present mood.” Mood was an important factor in enjoyment of food and eating habits, but it was not so salient as to shape daily emotional experiences or inwardly oriented value judgements. That is, their emotion connected
to food did not appear to go past the experience of eating and was concerned with food consumption in its own right rather than being directed inward.

This sentiment surrounding Sharples dining hall is far from unique to these individuals and is corroborated by both men and women in everyday rhetoric. The specific physical after-effects of eating at the dining hall are a constant source of conversation, acting sometimes as an area of common ground. Regret in many cases is a manifestation of physical distress, often brought up long after eating. Experiences of physical regret are almost universal, but the same is not true of emotionally charged guilt.

Women echoed this sentiment surrounding guilt and regret, and similarly seemed to intentionally avoid using the term guilt to characterize their experiences. Like the men, they volunteered the term regret in place of guilt, a word that was specifically used by the interviewer. One mentioned that she “definitely hear[s] women talking about guilt more often...in like god I feel so shitty because I just ate that blank or like I can’t have that I already had blank today.” Participants mentioned this theme of restriction throughout, and while these women did not explicitly report feeling guilt or regret, they indicated that others might. This feeling was divisive, varying at least to some extent based upon gender. While these women may not have overtly felt these sentiments, they did readily acknowledge feeling pressure to not eat certain things. Women were more likely to explicitly appeal to gender as a determinant of their eating habits and were more openly critical of these structures.

**CONTRASTING REGRET AND GUILT**

In examining the rhetoric of these individuals, especially the men who drew clear distinctions between regret and guilt, it became important to examine the particular meanings of
these words. The difference here seems to be external versus internal remorse or disappointment. While the regretful individual might be upset because of a situation in which they may or may not have had control, it seems that the guilty individual evokes a more individual experience. Guilt implies that one has absolute autonomy over outcomes, that they choose to act despite some moral code or guidelines for conduct. A guilty transgression might mean violating meaningful and profound personal ideologies. On the other hand, regret in this context might mean inadvisable choices, but ones that do not fundamentally mean anything beyond themselves. In this light it might make sense that these men feel somewhat negative about food choices, but that these decisions are not connected to intense emotional responses.

The distinction between guilt and regret was mentioned by a handful of interviewees and focus group members. One man expressed his feelings about these emotions. “I wouldn't get to the point where I would have…a bowl of ice cream and be like oh fuck I hate myself. I don't think guilt ever really played into it. I think…not with something that I just ate. More…with myself and my habits but never I can’t believe I did that, I suck.” Though not quite as explicit, this sentiment reflects a desire to reject the notion of guilt, instead describing it vaguely as some type of disappointment inferred by the listener. He acknowledges some sort of wrongdoing but does not draw any personal diminution of worth from it, instead treating eating as isolated, not a reflection on his person. Another female interviewee who distinguished between regret and guilt articulated the difference in this way, “I don’t look down on myself for having done it I guess but then I'm also…I feel like it’s more of the physical feeling bad rather than the emotionally feeling like I did a bad thing.” Interestingly this statement characterizes regret as a consequence of physical discomfort as opposed to guilt, which is seen as a sort of emotional downside of eating unhealthy foods. Another woman characterized the feelings of eating too much as “ahhh I'm way
too fat right now…that seems like a pretty natural reaction to eating what you shouldn’t.” This idea that negative feelings are a natural reaction to eating sharply contrasts with the man above, who characterizes the desire to be healthier or more skinny as an “unhealthy idea,” not a good or natural reaction to eating poorly.

The difference between men and women in this regard was subtle and not completely stark, as there were men who certainly connected eating poorly to body image. The fine distinction was that while both women and men tended to actively reject the idea of feeling bad about oneself, the women’s attempts tended to be less convincing. Take the woman who saw feeling bad for eating poorly as a natural response and connected eating what you shouldn’t to body image. Though she laughed as she articulated this thought, there was an interesting difference evidenced here. That is, while most men rejected negative emotion associated with eating poorly, women, despite some attempt to echo this thought, found it harder to convincingly separate eating from self worth and body image. This distinction is admittedly not obvious, but important. Further, the rejection of guilt and, to some degree regret, suggests some pressure to not feel bad about eating. There was some notion that thinking in this way about eating was unhealthy and potentially dangerous.

While most interviewees appeared to experience regret in some form or another, not all reported this sentiment. For our purposes in distinguishing these terms, it was most simple to view regret from a physical standpoint and guilt from an emotional one. A woman born outside of the United States spoke about the two terms as very separate, feeling “regret in the form of heartburn and indigestion, oh yeah…guilt? Less so. As a dear friend of mine spent a very long time telling me, it’s only a guilty pleasure if you feel guilty about it and I very rarely feel bad about eating food.” She actively rejected the idea that food is associated with negative feelings of
regret, leaving no ambiguity about her actual emotions. While no other respondent rejected the idea of regret so fully, one man when asked what he experienced associated with eating noted this: “if I feel like I’m not having a quote unquote balanced diet like ah you gotta pull it together... have a vegetable.” His response was unique in that it did not differentiate between regret and guilt, perhaps indicating a conflation of these terms. However, his lack of emotion may indicate that he was primarily interested in the physical consequences of his diet rather than the emotions that it evoked. This response was also framed in terms of balance, not appealing to a general idea of health or ideal outside of this equilibrium. Individuals belonging to both gender groups spoke of not experiencing regret and guilt acutely or at all, indicating that these feelings are not universal and may depend on cultural background as much as gender.

**POSITIVE EMOTION**

Other than issues of guilt and regret, participants connected food to emotion in positive ways, much of which came up unprompted. Most seemed to have a mix of associations, revealing complex and dynamic relationships to food. Much of the positive association with food related to family and community. “I definitely think it’s connected to [emotion] and I think of food... I usually do think of very cherished memories. I think a family relationships I think of a lot of good memories with that so I think for the most part eating is associated with that.” In many ways eating was directly linked to a sense of nostalgia and family, sometimes having to do with cultural heritage. One woman from the South revealed that where she grew up people “view[ed] food less as sustenance that’s good to keep you alive and more like this is what we eat when we talk to people when it makes us happy.” Participants almost universally recounted instances in which eating provided positive emotions, often associating these memories with family and community. Regardless of gender, essentially all interviewees spoke of food in
positive terms at some point and simultaneously, and to differing degrees, appeared to draw happiness from eating in specific contexts.

**AWARENESS OF GENDER**

Gender was explicitly brought up rather sparingly, though the women overall found this category more salient. One woman noted “people place kind of value judgements on food and then so like they see it as reflective of their personality or like something kind of abstract like that or some people just eat for...subsistence. And probably some of that divides on gender.” This woman echoes the findings regarding regret, her implication being that women might be more likely to draw personal worth from eating as opposed to just eating for fuel. Another claimed “[media] tells you what you're supposed to be eating. And then I think it’s reinforced through socialization of women.” Unprompted, the women brought up media attention to eating with relation to gender, though one man also indicated more broadly that differences in sex might be “a social thing.” This increased salience is especially interesting considering that the bulk of conversation about gendered differences was specifically concerned with women.

In many ways men and women seemed to have parallel views of gender in athletics and media representation. One man commented that on the track team “there’s also a very high rate of veganism especially on the women’s side. So I've associated with the gender gap a bit of like men are just going to eat the...like everything and then women are much more refined like healthful conscientious plate.” In the same vein, another argued “it tends to be that women are considered more health conscious about what they consume.” These men tended to recognize differences based upon gender involving increased restriction for women. With the exception of particular athletes, men were seen as more apt to eat without being overly conscientious while women were more strict. While the women pointed to media attention and men were more vague...
in their characterization of social things, both groups brought up the “interesting social trope” of a woman laughing with salad. They made reference to commercials, usually for fad diets or restaurants, in which women appear ecstatic while eating salads. This may indicate that unequal media attention based upon gender is salient to both groups.

For men, gender came up in discussion of athletics and broader social trends, some implicating media attention. These observations, while nuanced in some ways, were more readily brushed off or spoken about in a joking manner. Gendered differences were not identified as problematic and only one man brought up the dangers of investing too much self worth in eating and weight. In contrast, women appeared more aware of disordered eating as well as the dangers and problems with gendered expectations perpetuated by the media. Given that eating can be seen as imbued with structures of oppression based on gender, it does make some intuitive sense that women might be more attuned to the gendered problems associated with this activity (Thompson 1994, Counihan 1999). This difference may reflect a discrepancy in social awareness related to gendered differences in eating.
5. Cultural and Social Identities

While the focus of this study is a college campus in the United States, it is worth noting that not all of my interviewees grew up in the US. Further, my sample is geographically varied within the country, with individuals from the south, midwest, northeast, and pacific northwest among others. It is likely that varying cultural practices between these regions could produce variation not attributable to other demographic factors. These topics related to concepts of food are cross cultural, varying between regions and especially countries, both spatially and temporally (Lévi-Strauss 1966). Disentangling this precise interaction between space, time, and identity is not strictly essential for our purposes, but it would be unwise to ignore region or country of origin as possible confounding factors. More generally and rather unsurprisingly, participants tended to associate eating with culture and some drew profound meaning from certain foods and preparations.

College campuses like Swarthmore are relatively diverse, with students from around the country and world. While schools do not achieve equal representation for certain groups, this setting is overall a varied and compelling cross section of people. In few other places will one find people of such differing class, race, sexuality, and nationality. The specific makeup of Swarthmore’s campus is both unique and important. If my inquiry hopes to understand how identities influence food-related decisions, it is essential that how cultural background might interact with eating.

CULTURAL

Cultural meanings were embedded within most interviewees’ approaches to eating. For most, this was particularly prevalent when speaking about family mealtimes at home. Many
spoke of these family moments as formative and enjoyable, sometimes articulating boundaries between social experiences at Swarthmore and the more relaxed and positive associations of home. One woman from the southern United States felt “general soul food is pretty nostalgic since it’s nowhere to be found [in Swarthmore].” She related her cultural identity directly to food, noting that the way she grew up profoundly influenced her relationship to eating. She felt that the act of gathering around food was a way of forming community and spoke excitedly about eating with family, neighbors, and friends. Another woman who was born outside of the United States felt similarly, expressing that food was “really really really important” in her family. Further, eating and searching out food was “one of the easiest ways for [her] family to express care,” making this activity central to their relationships with one another. A man noted that his “family [was] really family oriented with meals so [they] would always every night for dinner sit down and have a meal together.” There was no large distinction between the experiences of interviewees based on race, gender, or most other factors. Though there was some indication that the woman from the southern United States articulated a slightly more profound link between food and culture, her testimony is not clearly more pronounced than any other. Rather, there was a consistent sense that food was connected to family and home life and that accessing this connection was important to cultural identity.

Reliably for both men and women, eating and making food was linked to a sense of identity and belonging. One woman from Hong Kong expressed “because food for [her was] such an important part of... cultural identity it’s such an intrinsic but also a very tangible way for me to kind of connect with home. It was actually really important for me to move off campus and cook for myself.” She was also a member of the intercultural group on campus, primarily acting as a cook for the annual dinner. This ability to interact with her peers through food was a
mode of “asserting identity or membership” as an international student. She sees food, especially preparation, as an extremely critical expression of identity. This fact was so essential to her that she chose to live off campus in order to consistently prepare food for herself and friends. One man from South Korea attempted to create foods that reminded him of home. While eating in the main dining hall he “like[ed] soups because coming to Swat [he couldn’t] really eat Korean hot broth so [he]…change[d] that up with the soup.” Though the soup ultimately did not compare well with food from home, he still sought to imitate what he saw as an essential feature of Korean food. Though stressed more emphatically by international students, interviewees universally identified eating within some group. This sense of identity generally came from a notion of culture or tradition, elements that were often connected to family. Though finding meaning through food appeared universal, differing interpretations of eating contexts pointed to major differences in the experience of the individual. In particular, cultural norms and themes surrounding eating differed greatly, especially between international students and those from the United States.

International students were more likely to point out discrepancies between their own cultures and that of Americans. While she hardly can be taken as representative, one woman from Hong Kong had a particularly interesting perspective on American cultural norms having to do with emotional eating.

The image of someone sobbing on a couch eating ice cream out of a tub with a spoon because they're sad. Definitely not a thing I actually thought people did in reality before I came here...you know it’s an image I saw in media but it was always an image from foreign media. That it was marked and so sort of very obvious but yeah back home people don’t do that....there is definitely a very marked cultural difference and again I don't think there is that same kind of linkage or what there is tends to be slightly westernized so it’s all about I’m sad here have some chocolate have some candy...so i don't know to what extent that’s influenced from western tropes with this idea that
sad equals sweet. That’s a very roundabout way of saying yes it is probably something to do with America.

This perspective is especially relevant as it pertains to emotions associated with eating. She seems to not only reject the idea that sweets are a natural response to sadness but more generally the notion that emotion is connected to eating in a primarily negative way. In direct opposition to common American ideas of relating emotion to eating, she is less likely to have an appetite because of negative feelings and more inclined to eat because of happiness or feeling relaxed. Given this cross cultural perspective, her comments highlight the constructed ways in which we connect emotion to eating.

The difference identified in her rather sophisticated analysis points to a gendered idea within mainstream American culture. Carole Counihan discusses a related idea, arguing “in women’s problematic relationship to food we also see their struggle to deal with their lack of power” (1999:83). While this woman from Hong Kong does not directly identify anything gendered about this prevalent image, it is clear this is a scene generally depicted of a woman. It is here that we see the conflicting messages that Counihan identifies for women. Women “want to be producers but find society casting them in the role of consumers and loading that role with more conflicts” (83). That is, women are cast as emotional beings who can mask sadness with ice cream and are at the same time expected to be thin. This can be seen as a manifestation of marginalization, feelings of powerlessness that ultimately may lead to restrictive or excessive eating (76).

Some saw cultural sharing as a social activity, a way to connect with other students. One man described campus events, “I think it’s kind of cool that everyone can kind of share people’s comfort food. Like I think tacos were really fun for me and it was exciting to see a big line of people in front of the taco man.” A woman noted that going to campus events “kind of allows for
social interactions in ways that some other activities don’t.” Events like these provide some respite from studying for students outside of meal times. Food is an essential feature and draw for all events and those that are centered on food are among the most popular. It is these food-centric events, generally run by student groups, that provide platforms for sharing culture. Participants like the man above who mentioned events serving food related to their heritage spoke with a sense of pride and excitement about the opportunity to share their identity with friends and peers. Social spaces can be created in this way through the sharing of culture, an activity that often involves eating. In this way food acts as an essential tool in the creation of spaces for cultural sharing, drawing students to events outside of the everyday dining hall experience.

SOCIAL

Somewhat like culture, the social function of food is inextricably tied to the acts of eating and preparing food. It is clear in the context of this college campus that cultural and social meanings are often intertwined, as sharing culture can be just as vital as maintaining identity for the individual. The social aspects of food are essential to our study population because interaction and collaboration with peers is so vital to the experience of this small residential college. Students discussed the function of the main dining hall as a congregation point, often seeing it as the only site of social interaction during week. This trend is additionally evidenced by a student living off campus who noted a decrease in social interaction since moving away from the meal plan. Rather unsurprisingly, Swarthmore students have a sometimes overwhelming amount of school work, rendering Sharples dining hall extremely important to maintaining relationships.
Interviewees tended to agree upon the social function of food on campus. Generally speaking the main dining hall, Sharples, was viewed as a hub of social activity, critical to the social lives of many. One woman noted “Sharples is the de facto central congregation point” and noted that after moving off campus she is “so rarely in that space it’s actually an obstacle to connecting with [her] friends.” This seemed specific to school for some as many noted a difference between the social function of food at home versus on campus. One man noted “at school, [food is] really important because mealtimes are some of my main social events like getting together over dinner or lunch.” Perhaps because of the structure of the small college campus coupled with busy schedules that many participants mentioned, meeting around food is more important than it might otherwise be.

In speaking about the main dining hall, one man remarked “my appreciation of Sharples is much less connected to the food but more connected to the people... Sharples has been super helpful with people on staff and that connection makes Sharples so much better to me.” He seemed to value the dining hall for his interactions with staff members rather than only conversations had with friends while eating. He indicates that he enjoys eating and Sharples for this reason despite the sometimes poor quality of food. A few participants mentioned a similar appreciation of the social space that Sharples provided, noting that it was a key congregation point. Universally, though to differing degrees, students complained about the lack of fresh and high quality food at campus dining locations. This fact did not seem to impede students from spending valuable time with friends in these dining spaces.

Campus events tended to draw more interest if food was offered, making eating somewhat of an incentive for many participants. One man in a focus group noted campus events offer “sort of on the end of really unhealthy dessert stuff or it’s...we actually have fresh fruit.”
Whether on either end of this spectrum, both men and women expressed excitement about events with food. Especially within the men’s focus group, students complained about the lack of fresh fruit on campus and conveyed surprise surrounding events offering these perceived healthier options. Echoing the excitement from the men, one woman felt the need to “take advantage” of events offering “free food” because of the constraints on campus food. Events were rarely identified by group affiliation or message but rather by what had been eaten, highlighting the importance of offerings as incentives for attendance.
6. Conclusion

The research presented here represents a preliminary exploration of gender and other factors related to eating on college campuses. I sought to gain an understanding of how individuals think about food consumption and how they speak of their experiences on Swarthmore’s campus and beyond. For Swarthmore students on the meal plan, food is restricted in terms of offerings, times, and spaces. This means that food is an extremely important way in which students organize and experience daily life. As such a vital part of college life, eating on Swarthmore’s campus represents an important facet of understanding this college’s culture. Through both focus groups and interviews, data were collected and analyzed qualitatively. This research supports the hypothesis that eating is an important aspect of campus life and suggests that differences in approaches to food are at least in part attributable to gender.

It is worth noting how gender might interact with a range of demographic factors not substantially analyzed here. In sometimes explicit ways, participants noted how gendered modes of eating varied based upon background. There is some evidence that women from different parts of the country or from other countries may think of food differently than others. This is potentially related to the race and class makeups of these areas, or may simply reflect differing cultural norms. Simultaneously, although the scope of this inquiry does not allow for it, an intersectional approach to this population is needed if we hope to accurately understand how people approach eating. As Becky W. Thompson argues, “an expansive understanding of socialization requires scrutiny of the power of racism and classism as they inform standards of appearance” (1994:45). It is incumbent upon us to continue her work with the awareness that there are a confluence of factors influencing how food consumption operates. Approaching
eating in this way is particularly relevant to spaces of diverse populations and should by no means be limited to places of higher education. This study of Swarthmore College represents a preliminary attempt to identify themes worthy of further exploration.

This research highlights the importance of eating as a social setting on college campuses. Many saw food and spaces of consumption as vital to interaction with peers within an otherwise busy work environment. A large proportion of individuals recounted interacting with friends and acquaintances almost exclusively in the main dining hall. For students living off campus, social interaction was sometimes curtailed by a lack of participation in school meal times. Events outside of average daily life were attended more frequently and with more enthusiasm based on the quality of edible offerings. Food was often seen as the primary motivation for attendance, especially at events hosted by specific cultural organizations. These social meanings were related to cultural identities and were generally connected rather clearly by interviewees both through these events and off-campus activities. Outside of an academic setting, many students associated mealtimes with family and a sense of nostalgia. For those who did not express a meaningful connection between food and family, there remained a sense of recognition of the importance of eating in bringing people together.

Broadly speaking, students appeared to have some awareness of eating as a gendered and culturally specific activity. Accordingly, participants brought up issues of media tropes and differing standards surrounding gender. This was especially true in focus groups and was perhaps spurred by a more collaborative conversation and desire of participants to appear more socially aware in the presence of peers.
HOW DO THESE FINDINGS FIT EXISTING UNDERSTANDINGS OF SOCIETY?

The findings presented here are of sociological interest primarily by virtue of representing a key part of cultural discrepancies. This is a general goal of sociological work, to uncover the elements of taste through studying social conditions (Bourdieu 1984). Conversations with interviewees implied preferences related to aspects of identity including but not limited to gender. Still others drew direct connections between upbringing and eating habits, often recognizing cultural differences between their own experiences and the perceived experiences of peers. This relationship between culture and eating is not limited to nationality, but also to modes of interpreting gender and other identities, as these powerful modes of socialization deeply affect approaches to food.

This thesis additionally sought to uncover narratives about the gendered problems surrounding food. The act of eating is socially enriching in many circumstances, but it is also an act judged by others. It is not unique in this way. Social structures and bureaucracies induce “a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault 1977:201). What Foucault means by this is that social expectations come to be engrained not just through the state, but through acts of self policing. This is relevant to the ways in which Swarthmore students, especially those identifying as women, restrict certain foods without supervision or even when unwatched. Though this phenomenon is somewhat tied to generalized notions of health, there is certainly an aspect of value judgement outside of this.

Exploring Foucault’s notion of self policing naturally leads to a consideration of which acts related to food are considered more or less correct. These expectations, related to gender, the body, and other factors, are somewhat standard in the United States. Relevant to this point is the notion of stigma, which represents any act or way of being that might inhibit complete social
acceptance (Goffman 1963). In this case, stigma is associated with both the physical act of eating and bodily forms seen as resulting from this activity. Some testimonies support this way of seeing eating, as many expressed contextually differing eating habits. Most participants, especially a couple of women, expressed concern with weight and related this directly to eating habits. Stigma, though not directly interrogated by interviewees, represented a relevant undertone to arguments concerning choosing what to eat.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The simultaneous advantage and disadvantage of these interview-based data is that they tend to be in-depth and extremely specific. Gathering particular qualitative data concerning the ways in which individuals conceptualize eating is extremely useful in its own right, as it does provide some preliminary clues toward answering our questions. As a first point of reference, the information presented here would additionally be critical to crafting broad survey questions aimed at this study population and others. Prioritizing depth over breadth in this research, I endeavored to privilege personal accounts over establishing generalizable trends. Though no less vital to our understanding of how eating interacts with gender, doing this qualitative work is an entirely different project. While interviews yielded readily observable intuitive patterns, survey data corroborating these trends would be extremely useful. Additional interviews would be critical to establish more robust trends and to capture a more diverse and representative subset of the college community.

While not as obviously relevant to the setting of a college campus, the process of cooking and serving food has been left uninterrogated here. Some students did mention this activity when asked about eating, generally pertaining to life off campus. For young adults, whether they be associated with places of higher education or not, studying the process of adjusting to creating
sustenance for oneself is potentially fruitful. Although many students seldom cook while attending colleges like Swarthmore, preparing food may likely represent an orienting force for students off campus and after graduation. This is likely true in terms of gender but inquiry certainly should not be limited to that perspective. Cooking is clearly intimately tied to eating, and varies as much as food preparation.

This research highlights the vital nature of eating to people culturally and socially, showing the need for a nuanced understanding of this topic. My study brings to light some potential areas of interest which should be investigated both quantitatively and qualitatively in future work. As such a frequent activity, not just eating but meaning surrounding food has ramifications for many aspects of everyday life. From an academic standpoint, and particularly through qualitative lenses, relationships to food are worthy of further exploration. The relationship of gender to eating is of concern not just for the discipline of sociology, but for psychology, anthropology, and others.

On college campuses in particular, where food is generally provided to students, it is vital for administrators to note variation in experience related to food. This is even more pronounced in cases when eating is related to emotion and mental health. In the present study for example, many students made policy recommendations and complained about offerings unprompted. A complete understanding of the meanings associated with food, based on not just gender but all other identities, is vital to care effectively for student populations. In this sense identity related to eating should be considered as a key component of student life and well-being.
References

Appendix A

Demographic Data and Questions:

Class Year, Age, Birthplace/Hometown, Race/Ethnicity, Gender, Sexuality, Athletics

Family:
How important is food in your family? Why?
What kinds of foods did you eat growing up? (Specific anecdotes?)
In what ways does your family gather around food?

General:
Where on campus do you like to eat? What is appealing about this location? Is it important to you? If so, why is that important to you?
What kinds of food do you usually prefer?
What kinds of foods do you consider healthy?
How do you usually like your food prepared? (e.g. fried, steamed, sauteed, raw)
How important is food to your everyday experience?
Could you describe how you see food? (Probe, is it fuel, dangerous, something that you look forward to?)
How is your relationship to food different now than it was before college?
How has your relationship to food evolved?
What about food and eating is important to your everyday experience? How important would you say it is to you?
Do you feel that you put a lot of thought into making choices about food?
What is the most important factor you consider when choosing what to eat? Why?

Dieting/Restriction:
Do you have any allergies or dietary restrictions? How do these/this restriction(s) impact your relationship to food?
Have you ever felt pressure to eat or not eat certain foods? How so?
Have you ever dieted or counted calories? What was your reason for doing so?
Do you feel that food is connected to emotion for you? In what way?
Do you ever experience guilt connected to eating? Why?

Nutrition/Health:
Do you think there is any connection between athletics and eating?

Social:
How important is food to you socially? Why?
To what extent does food consumption shape social experiences at Swarthmore.
Do you ever experienced social anxiety because of food?