

‘Please can we talk about politics or something controversial, instead of my stomach?’: A Communication Study of Food Discourse and Identity Construction

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ABSTRACT: The study of food, an integral component of culture, provides insights into our beliefs, customs, and daily life. When our lives revolve around the importance of food, how do we make sense of an interruption in that system? People with food allergies discover ways to make sense of their food allergies and learn how to communicate their stigmatized allergies to others. The reactions of non-allergic people to those with dietary restrictions have implications for allergy sufferers as well. Interviews revealed the taint perceived by food allergy sufferers and the sensemaking process they implemented to confront the taint through three distinct avenues: food choice morality, unwanted attention, and self-induced isolation. Within these constraints, allergy sufferers may need to create a mechanism to handle their dietary restrictions and to communicate their condition to others. Findings highlight effective communicative methods used by food allergy sufferers including surrogate protection, developing an enlightening narrative, selecting appropriate nomenclature for the food challenge, trusting the environment, and relationally specific disclosure rules. This study provides a foundation for understanding the cultural importance of food, how humans create identities related to food, how frequency and implications of food allergies affect people, and how dietary restrictions affect interpersonal communication.

Food holds a prominent place in our culture, providing not only basic sustenance, but also a platform for building personal identity, social connections, and interpersonal relationships. Throughout history, food has defined human transformation and become a symbol of social gatherings (Fox, 2014). Society has, in the past few hundred years, become obsessed with food discourse through many media formats, from food writing to food television to web-based social platforms. Most recently, social media leads our food interactions with platforms such as Instagram, Facebook and Pinterest. Food may have become symbolic of one’s profession, passion, or relationships with friends and family, but food’s undeniable importance and the role it plays in cultural identity gives relevance to this study.

For individuals with food allergies, dietary restrictions imposed by their allergy deny them the ease with which the social constructs of American life normally develop (Flokstra-de Blok and Dubois, 2012). The diagnosis of a food allergy becomes a life-changing event for many and may include social implications that require personal sacrifices to maintain good health (McNicol and Weaver,

2013). Unlike making a possibly moral decision to adhere to a vegetarian diet, people do not choose food-specific allergies. As most social gatherings involve the sharing of food, individuals with food-specific allergies may find that others view their restrictive diet negatively (McNicol and Weaver, 2013). This study explored how people with food allergies implement different ways of making sense, communicating, and articulating the meaning of food.

A food allergy can be defined as an adverse health effect resulting from an unusual immune response that occurs repeatedly upon exposure to a specific food (Stallings, 2016). In the United States, food allergies affect roughly four percent of adults (Jackson, Howie and Akinbami, 2013). This study focused on biological food allergies that require newfound sensemaking and addressed how people understand symbolic and biological interruptions (i.e., food allergies) (Weick, 1995). Using a qualitative approach, this research provided insight into the lives of individuals with food allergies by examining how they conceive, respond to, and communicate about the relationships between food, food allergies, and social settings. This study brought these areas together to provide an understanding of how this population communicates within the restrictions of food-negated diets.

Meaning(s) of food

Harvard anthropologist Richard Wrangham (2009) believed that the actual cooking of food, which provided more nutrient-dense sustenance, allowed our bodies to develop larger brains. Humans transformed from transient hunter-gatherers to social creatures who gathered around the fire at a specific time and place. The sharing of a meal helped develop civil capabilities, which involves eye contact, and the development of conversation (Pollan, 2013). According to Michael Pollan ‘it is the act of cooking that separates humans from animals and forms the bridge between nature and culture’ (2013, p. 18). All aspects of eating, including the procurement of food, its preparation, and consumption, make meaningful communication possible.

Food defines culture

According to Gomez-Benito and Lozano (2014), the economic relevance, the globalization of food processes, and the regulations associated with food occupy a large percentage of present human endeavours. The enormous time spent in acquiring, preparing, and consuming food indicates its importance not only to the global economy, but also to our personal relationships. In addition to basic sustenance, the religious significance of food influences

many cultural practices. The communion of breaking bread, for example, brings together not only our bodies, but also our beliefs.

Identity construction

Humans can identify themselves by gender, age, religion, and race, but they generally agree when, as a whole, they belong to a common culture. Kenneth Burke argued that, 'humans have a symbolic understanding of themselves and of each other, and share knowledge through sharing their symbol-systems with each other' (Foss, Foss and Trapp, 2002, para. 5). Thus, although humans remain biologically distinct, individuals seek commonality and communion, in terms of 'common sensations, concepts, images, ideas and attitudes' (Burke, 1950, p. 21). How people assign meaning to food shapes them, both morally and culturally. Eating helps create the relation between a person and the world, and therefore food, or more specifically, food discourse acts as an essential identity-defining symbolic endeavour.

Food allergies

Food allergies have become a prevalent component of Western societies (Flokstra-de Blok and Dubois, 2012). Not only does the presence of food allergies cause disruption in the daily life of the individual, they can also influence an individual's personal connection to others. Given the biological implications of food allergies, the manner in which people communicate their food-based allergies becomes paramount. Given the dangers that lurk in the public realm, food allergy sufferers must often disclose their allergies, making a private issue public, and thus drawing a distinction between them and other non-food allergic people. An allergen-free diet, the only way to avoid the occurrence of symptoms, affects adult patients not only physically, but also socially.

Food allergies and stigma

Discourse regarding food restrictions, however, can become complicated amidst food-based stigma. When a person with a food allergy rejects a certain food, this often creates social implications. Erving Goffman defined stigma as a 'special discrepancy between virtual and actual social identity' (1963, p. 3), which emphasizes the differences between the present and the expected. He explained how, through stigma, the individual becomes 'reduced in our minds from a whole person to a tainted, discounted one' (Goffman, 1963, p. 3). For those at the receiving end of the stigma, shame results from this discrimination, causing the stigmatized individual to feel hypersensitive or even defensive (Goffman, 1963, p. 5).

Despite the social costs of communicating food-based allergies in public settings, few people grasp a full understanding of the social issues confronting someone with a food allergy (NIH, 2014, para. 4). An allergy, often seen as an invisible disability, becomes apparent upon self-disclosure in public settings (McNicol and Weaver,

2013 p. 220). These instances provoke communication responses since people with a food allergy appear normal until they verbally reveal their vulnerability and must attempt to negotiate identity in light of other's stigmatizing perception.

Sensemaking and breaking bread

Karl Weick's theory of sensemaking provides a method of understanding medical conditions, such as food allergies. Since this concept involves both individual identity and social placement, tensions exist as people with food allergies struggle to stay within their societal frames of reference (Weick, 1995). As humans bond to each other, often through the eating and sharing of food, making sense of a food allergy can provide a connection for allergy sufferers that may have been lost due to a restrictive diet.

Food, symbolic of relationships, gatherings, and religious events can provide people with their perceived social placement. Farré and Barnett (2013) asserted that, '[f]ood has enormous value both in terms of its potential to carry messages about identity and meaning, but also to reveal the structural dynamics of society' (p. 152). So not only do food allergy sufferers gain a better understanding of the implications of their food allergies, but they also learn proper communication methods relating to their food restrictions.

Food labelling, social movements, and food trends have influenced food meanings, and the sensemaking processes related to food (Farré and Barnett, 2013, p. 152). According to Farré and Barnett, over the last few decades, profound changes in food meaning-making processes have occurred due to the daily presence of media and food communication (2013, p. 150). Within this communication influx, people with food allergies need to create their own understanding of food, in addition to discovering where they place themselves within our food-centric society.

Having formed a foundation of existing scholarly and literary works, areas of interest that still need further consideration have been identified and will be examined in this study through the following questions:

- How do food allergy sufferers make sense of the perceived stigma/taint associated with their food allergy?
- How do people with food allergies help family and friends understand the challenges of a restrictive diet?

Method

Participants

In-depth interviews conducted with twenty-one participants, included people with either medically or self-diagnosed food allergies. Because this study focused on biological food allergies, rather than food choices based on other factors such as appearance, weight loss, or faith-based restrictions, this study excluded individuals with self-proclaimed food negated choices. Examples of food allergies included: fish/shellfish, peanuts or tree nuts, eggs, specific

fruits or vegetables, wheat, and dairy. Recruitment of participants occurred through convenience and snowball sampling of the author's colleagues, neighbors, and friends. The demographics of these participants included: 17 females and 4 males, 20 Caucasians and one Asian, with an average age of 42.5 years.

Procedure

By using a qualitative approach, this study sought to better understand people with food allergies, specifically how they conceive, respond, and communicate the relationships between food, food allergies, and social settings. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with participants that lasted on average thirty-five minutes. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained in reported findings by changing the names of each of the participants.

Data Analysis

Once the interviews had been conducted, audio of each interview collected, and all data transcribed, then analysis of the data using a grounded theory approach commenced. Following a grounded theory method approach of data analysis based on Glaser and Strauss' (1967) constant comparative method, open and axial coding was used. Following the open coding of the data, axial coding was employed to consolidate the data.

Findings and interpretation

Making sense of taint

Interview data revealed food allergy sufferers experience varying degrees of stigma due to their restricted diets. Taint, or stigma, played a prominent role in the sensemaking process of food allergy sufferers. Perceptions of taint included both explicit indicators of stigma, such as derisive comments and prejudice, as well as more implicit reactions, such as awkward silences or a 'rolling of the eyes'.

Participants made sense of others' stigma related to their food allergy(ies) through three distinct avenues: food choice morality, unwanted attention, and the self-induced isolation.

Food choice morality. As a result of acknowledging or publicizing their allergy, participants endured inquiries questioning the veracity or legitimacy of their allergy. Participants pointed to others' reactions as evidence of the taint associated with their restricted diet. For instance, Joseph, a 51-year-old male who has a severe intolerance to both gluten and dairy, shared his theory of the reaction by others:

I think when we start talking about how you eat, it gets at how we live and what matters. So...we're talking about *bread*. So, I can't eat *bread*?? That's like at the *core* of what *life is!* It's a huge cultural provocation, not just a quirky thing. And, I think that's why they interrogate me every time I eat a meal.

This scepticism, therefore, positioned the allergy sufferer in a defensive stance trying to verify the validity of not simply his physiological allergy, but also the symbolic and social impacts of his condition. Social gatherings, in particular, created a complicated communication environment wherein the food allergy sufferer had to share their dietary restrictions against a backdrop of taint associated with choice, identity, and ideology.

Unwanted attention. Accommodation, seemingly forced upon others by the food allergy sufferer because of his or her restriction, induced embarrassment, anxiety, and undue attention associated with feeling 'special' or being identified as the culprit. Insistence upon the requirement of an accommodation, rather than the choice of special treatment, verified to others the legitimacy of the request. When the social gathering occurred in a restaurant or public setting, the food allergy sufferer often felt singled out for their special needs. Ella, a 31-year-old female, commented: 'I feel high-maintenance or special which is not really what I'm trying to do. It's more of something I have to do for my health'. Thus, the unwanted attention of their allergy, as a public product, became the feature of unwanted discourse affecting all parties involved.

Self-induced isolation. The perception of taint by a food allergy sufferer was believed to interrupt the natural cycle of social fluidity. Relationships enacted in social gatherings involving food become fractured because the participants could no longer engage in foods and rituals so intimately connected with interpersonal bonding, such as 'going out for pizza'. For Grace, a 56-year-old woman, the food restrictions caused social deprivation: 'It's not just a case of me not being able to eat the food, it's that I'm not having the same social life. Friendships have changed ... and some, just disappeared completely'. Teasing from friends and derisive comments from others added to this perception of stigma.

The topic of food restriction(s) often became the centre of conversations in social settings, like a family reunion. Joseph explained:

Everybody knows that I have allergies so they are constantly going: 'Can you eat this? Can you eat *this*?' and 'Why can't you eat that? What's it like?' People are talking about *my* digestive issues while we're trying to have a party! Please can we talk about politics or something controversial, instead of my stomach!?!'

Consequently, the delineation between a physical reaction to a food and the social implications of that reaction became blurred, creating both physical and psychological stress. Food allergy sufferers thus self-isolated to avoid social contagion, reducing the perceived discomfort experienced by those around them.

Taint Management Strategies

To manage this taint, food allergy sufferers developed a variety of communication strategies, including surrogate

protection; developing an enlightening narrative; selecting appropriate nomenclature for the food challenge; trusting the environment, and relationally specific disclosure rules.

Surrogate protectors. Many food allergy sufferers benefitted from a team approach to handling the challenges of their restrictions. Family members and friends, in particular, acted as surrogate protectors to increase awareness of their loved one's allergy, guarding them from against eating questionable foods, and substantiating to others the validity of the food allergy sufferer's challenge. As such, this approach underscores how a food allergy was viewed as a communal rather than individual experience. Eating outside the home can be one of the most challenging events for a food allergy sufferer, therefore these surrogate protectors played an important role in helping provide a more normal life.

Since family and friends know the frightening reality of having witnessed an allergic reaction and the effect on their loved one, they were often more willing and able to communicate to others regarding their allergies. Ashley, a 28-year-old female, said: 'My *whole* family has seen me have a reaction. So, that kind of hits them hard. You don't really need to see it more than once to realize, "Oh, she's actually *allergic!*"' Participants repeatedly indicated that family, friends and co-workers functioned as surrogate protectors. Consequently, the food allergy sufferer benefitted from this added level of care seemingly best accomplished via a team-based approach.

Effective narrative methods. As simple disclosure of their food allergy (e.g., 'I have an allergy to broccoli') inadequately conveyed the challenges experienced by the participants, food allergy sufferers used narrative discourse, rather than scientific-biological explanations, to help communicate the requirements of their food-restricted lifestyle and bring to life their allergy in ways others would respect and react to accordingly.

For advice to others with dietary restrictions, Ella recounted her approach. She said, 'start with like some rational explanation and then just personalize it to yourself'. Giving examples of the physical impact of an allergic reaction on others provided visceral images that justified the fear associated with allergies. For example, Rob explained how people do not always understand the severity of a reaction, but his description clarified the danger in ways others would understand and respect: 'Someone could just say tough it up, but if you've never gone anaphylactic, there's no toughing it up. It was the scariest thing I've ever been through, waking up and not being able to breathe. I thought I was dead for sure'. Stories of the physical response of an allergic reaction provided validity to the food allergy sufferers' needs. Providing a concrete narrative for surrogate protectors to appreciate and follow, equipped these interactants with a better understanding and appropriate action plans.

Humour, another communication tactic, served to temporarily suspend disbelief. For example, Rob, who has a

low tolerance for seafood, gave this example of a light-hearted manner of communication: 'I can only handle so much before it gets ugly, so if someone asks "you sure you don't want a big bite?" I'll say, "you sure you don't want to *wear* it?"' The image of a repugnant biological response, framed in a humorous, but purposeful anecdote, highlighted the gravity of his condition while also demonstrating how his allergy would not simply impact him, but others as well.

Naming the taint. Food allergy sufferers encountered a variance of terminology while attempting to disclose the challenges of their allergy. 'Sensitivity' and 'intolerance', both nebulous terms in this context, allowed room for incredulity and provided others with the impression that the food allergy was a choice rather than a necessity. Participants reported that the appropriate naming of the challenge was essential in communicating their allergy to others. In particular, the word 'allergy' was highlighted as providing a more authentic impression of the effect of the allergen because of its cultural cache.

Participants with serious life-threatening allergies, such as anaphylaxis, took special offense with the ambiguous misnaming of their allergies by others. Grace, in reference to the lack of consistency of nomenclature, said, 'the main issue is that so many people claim to have allergies when they really have intolerances'. For Grace, this variance in the nomenclature of an allergy increased the disbelief of others and failed to provide the impression of authenticity required by the food allergy sufferer.

Sustained vigilance. Food allergy sufferers, whether eating at home or in a public setting, made decisions about where to eat based on level of comfort, trust, and previous experience. When dining at home, food allergy sufferers emphasized control over their food consumption. With improved labelling on packaged food over the past few years, trust of these types of foods has increased.

When asked how he navigates social gatherings that involve food, Ed had the following response: 'It's all social gatherings! I've got to be mindful of who/what/when/how with food, so I've become the controller of social gatherings, meaning that if social gatherings are happening, 80% of them are at my house'. Several participants said that they would prefer to have the social gathering at their home, bring their own food to the other locations or make a habit of eating at home before attending social functions.

Dining in a restaurant setting means the food allergy sufferer must relinquish control of food preparation to others. Food allergy sufferers employed the following strategies for eating out: be part of the decision in the restaurant choice; research the restaurant's menu online; call the restaurant before the visit to ensure they serve something suitable; at the restaurant, choose completely 'safe' foods; and clearly disclose the allergy to the server. Finally, if the serving staff does not convey trust, immediately consult the manager. Participants agreed that trust was dependent upon the known reliability of the restaurant.

Disclosure tactics. The food allergy sufferer created specific disclosure rules determined by the proximity of the other person and perceptions of his/her measure of care. Participants with more severe allergic reactions felt a greater need to disclose their allergy with determined clarity. Grace, whose allergic reaction includes anaphylaxis, said, the food allergy sufferer should aim 'not to be afraid to speak out about it, not to be embarrassed about it ... to be honest and specific, make it clear so that people understand'. These instructions, common among many participants, also included the importance of the timing of the disclosure so bystanders are properly prepared to avoid tragedy.

Neither present nor responsible for the preparation of their food, the food allergy sufferer relied on accurate communication to disclose their food restrictions. Personal advocacy means ownership of the allergy, taking personal responsibility for informing others of the required accommodation. Annie describes this restaurant scenario, regarding her communication diligence:

If I'm not confident with the server, I'll tell them, 'Listen, I'm *extremely* allergic to nuts, and someone (a family member or friend) will pipe in like *deathly* allergic'. I've come to read their faces (the servers') and decide if I need to pump up the information.

Through these examples, food allergy sufferers shared effective means of communication tactics, including the informed decision to disclose, and the proper timing and adequate depth of detail of the disclosure.

Discussion

Based on the findings of this research, perceived taint affected food allergy sufferers' sensemaking through three distinct avenues: food choice morality; other accommodation; and self-induced isolation. To manage this taint, food allergy sufferers developed a variety of communication strategies, including surrogate protection; developing an enlightening narrative; selecting appropriate nomenclature for the food challenge; trusting the environment; and relationally specific disclosure rules. Three major conclusions can be drawn from these perceptions of taint and the way in which food allergy sufferers develop and manage their communication strategies.

First, surrogate protection, created by family members, co-workers and friends creates a circle of trust that aids the food allergy sufferer with the daunting task of communicating the challenges associated with a food-restricted diet and the implications of an allergic reaction.

Second, food allergy sufferers use enlightening narratives to educate others about the existence, extent, and severity of their allergies. This informative and persuasive method of discourse effectively communicates details that are otherwise lost in the simple, scientific disclosure of the condition. Third, when the source of taint appears obvious, such as someone with an undesirable

profession or physical attribute (e.g., prostitute, sanitation worker), the primary burden of communication has already occurred (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999). For food allergy sufferers, however, their condition creates a particular rhetorical burden given food-borne allergies are often invisible differences to others. As such, not surprisingly, participants used narrative discourse, an effective method for overcoming these communication difficulties, to convey their stories to others in both public and private settings.

This study's findings also have three practical implications for practitioners, sufferers, allergy-awareness organizations, and food service personnel. First, the details of a food allergy and its implications should be clearly communicated, whether by the food allergy sufferer himself or by trusted members of the sufferers' surrogate protectors. Second, given the findings of this study, the restaurant industry plays a vital role in creating environments of trust with clientele, and family, who experience allergies. Thus, restaurants, rather than simply advertising or marketing that they serve products free of particular allergens, might also consider how their food offerings can create discourse that invites, rather than excludes, food allergy sufferers. Inclusiveness can be presented in the design of menus and the way servers communicate, to create a welcoming atmosphere for the food allergy sufferer. Third, according to the findings from this study, trusting the environment in which the food allergy sufferer dines depends on the efficacy of communication with the host before, during, and post-meal, particularly within another's home. Through repeated 'safe' meals, the level of confidence the food allergy sufferer develops will increase, and societal norms restored.

Conclusion

Through the qualitative process of this research, findings revealed insight into the sensemaking processes of food allergy sufferers. Identity construction, altered by the interruption of a food allergy, develops through the process of interpreting the reactions of others to this interruption. As food becomes a component of identity, food allergy sufferers organize people based on their needs. Although not all participants perceived such stigma, participants overwhelmingly indicated alteration of their activities, fractured social connections, and the challenge of accepting the accommodations made by others on their behalf. Sensemaking, through taint identification and communication strategies, enabled the food allergy sufferer to effectively manage the interruption. By developing effective communication strategies to manage this taint, food allergy sufferers can better convey the extent and effect of their allergies, and the proper protocol to manage allergic reactions. This research sheds light on the effects of food allergies on identity construction and interpersonal relationships, as well as the communication strategies this

population utilizes to manage and communicate the taint-based challenges associated with their food-based allergies.

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