

Kitchens and Kinship:

Student Food Sharing Practices in Shared Accommodation

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Abstract

Shared student accommodation is more often than not the first experience in student life and comes with mixed expectations; the fear of moving into the unknown, living with total strangers for a year, and the excitement and anticipation of the creating of bonds amongst the flatmates. The student kitchen is the hub of shared accommodation in university, and it is in this arena that new students seek to navigate and negotiate the relationships that will be significant to them throughout university. Food is not neutral in this space; it takes on a symbolic value and power in the building and negotiating of relationships. The aim of this research is to determine the ways in which the kinship bonds found amongst students living in shared accommodation is connected to the food-sharing practices that develop over time. To examine this, I conducted interviews with two groups of students; a second year group living on campus, and a third-year group living off campus. I also examined my own experiences of living in shared student accommodation, and how the avoidance of food sharing hinders the formation of kinship bonds. Although this small-scale study can by no means account for every form and method of food-sharing that occurs in student accommodation, it uncovers a wealth of information on a smaller scope of practices. The results of my data revealed that students use a wide variety of strategies to negotiate the sharing of food, objects, and space in a shared kitchen. Furthermore, the data showed that the students utilising these strategies were often aware of the kin-building implications of these acts and used food-sharing with intent of creating bonds. This was even more evident when food sharing was avoided, as these students often seemed uninclined to create bonds of kin through sharing with others.

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Introduction

Food, for students, is far from a neutral commodity; much time is spent thinking about food. A student kitchen in shared accommodation is a minefield for food-based social etiquette. Food is jealously guarded, and cupboard and fridge space can become disputed territory. Related responsibilities such as cleaning the kitchen and fridge, bins, and washing dishes can also create frictions. Students become adept at developing systems for negotiation of the shared space, and out of this, food-sharing practices develop.

A typical on-campus student flat consists of a corridor lined with several bedroom doors, a shared kitchen, and sometimes a shared bathroom. First-year students, often living away from their family and home for the first time in their lives, arrive to a group of total strangers, and are expected to live in close quarters with them, sharing a bathroom and the space to prepare and eat their meals. Seeking familiarity, these students perform acts of kinship they have learned at home in order to create bonds between the group. As these bonds are the only form of kin the students live with during the term, the relationships built are performed as described by Van Vleet; in imitation of traditional biological familial bonds.

There is a wealth of scholarship discussing commensality, and the connections between food and kinship. In this essay, I seek to examine these subjects in the context of student accommodation, and how they can feed into our understanding of the developing kinship relationships present in a new student flat.

I propose that the close relationships in shared student accommodation are directly connected with intimate living and the sharing of food items and meals. Sahlins (2013) thoroughly examines the connection between commensality and kinship, and I will use his ethnography of the inhabitants of the Nebilyer Valley to demonstrate how kinship is not simply a matter of genetic relatedness, but is in fact fluid and can be replicated socially. Van Vleet (2008) examines kinship as performative, that acts of kinship work to create, maintain, and reinforce bonds of kinship amongst a group. This is a key concept in my examination of the bonds of kin formed through acts of food-sharing amongst students.

A variety of food sharing practices can be seen in a student flat, from the sharing of communal items such as teabags and sugar, to full-scale flat meals where members contribute to a collective meal and share in the related responsibilities of shopping,

cooking, and cleaning. These events undoubtedly cement relationships and form kinship bonds within the flat. Conversely, flats where members refuse to share food in most or any form seem to inevitably result in frictions or limited relationships.

Studies of kinship and relatedness are at the very core of anthropology, and a considerable amount of data on kinship bonds can be found in ethnographies the world over. My original aim with this research was to examine the practices of a culture vastly different to my own, and to visit people and places I had never experienced. However, my examination into kinship brought me to realise that there was a wealth of information literally on my own doorstep.

The aim of this research is to establish what the food-sharing practices of students are in shared accommodation and how they relate to the formation and negotiation of kinship-like relationships and friendships. Part of this involves understanding the role of food as an agent for social negotiation. I want to tie in the scholarship related to the agency of an object (Appadurai, 1986, Jenkins et al, 2014), as well as that on the kinship and food sharing practices in other cultures (Abbots, 2013, 2016, Van Vleet, 2009). There needs to be an examination of kinship (Sahlins, 2011, Feuchtwang, 2013) and what kinship means in the context of shared student accommodation.

I use a combination of autoethnography, interviews, and participant observation as my methodology. My aim is to show that food sharing is an integral and essential aspect of the development of kinship relations amongst student flat sharers and friendship groups. A variety of food sharing practices exist which vary in their relative ability to build relationships, and students use these practices to form bonds and define relationships.

Literature Review

A first step in this research is to establish what 'kinship' actually means. There have been numerous studies and debates about what constitutes kinship, and the issue is a particularly emotive subject. Kinship is experienced in a very personal way, which can make it particularly difficult to imagine other forms of kinship. In modern British culture, for instance, biological kinship ties are privileged. Although non-biological forms of kinship

such as step-parenting, fostering, and adoption are commonplace, in many ways they follow the form and ideal of biological kinship.

The works of Marshall Sahlins are among the most important anthropological discussions on the discourse of kinship, and Sahlins' huge contribution to this field is widely recognised.

In his two-part essay *What Kinship is – And Is Not* (2013), Sahlins establishes that kinship is not bound to genetics alone but is often a varied combination of biological descent and socially constructed relatedness. In fact, he goes further to argue that in human societies, kinship relationships can be seen on a spectrum from entirely biological in origin to entirely socially constructed. This means that the essential defining quality of kinship, to Sahlins, is not solely biological nor social, but rather something else, which he calls 'mutuality of being.' In presenting his argument, Sahlins draws on a multitude of ethnographic examples, and explores a number of theoretical frameworks that have been applied in the discourse on kinship. The key to understanding Sahlins' notions on kinship is an understanding of the concept of mutuality of being. Sahlins writes

'The specific quality of kinship, I argue, is "mutuality of being": kinfolk are persons who participate intrinsically in each other's existence; they are members of one another.

"Mutuality of being" applies as well to the constitution of kinship by social construction as by procreation...' (Sahlins, 2011).

To demonstrate what mutuality of being looks like, Sahlins uses selected ethnographies. A good example is his discussion of cultural beliefs in New Guinea that relate to how kinship is transmitted. Here, it is not blood that transfers kinship, but rather another substance entirely. To the inhabitants of the Nebilyer Valley, a form of grease or fat, known as *kopong*, flows through the land and those that were born and live on it. This *kopong* is the transmitter of kinship and forges these bonds between socially established kin just the same as biologically related kin.

Conveyed in the father's semen and mother's milk, *kopong* founds a substantial connection between a child and its birth parents. Yet as such 'grease' is also present in sweet potatoes and pork, the same consubstantial effect can be achieved by food-sharing, commensality, or eating from the same land. In this way, the children or grandchildren of immigrants may be fully integrated as kinfolk' (Sahlins, 2011, p.1).

From this, it can be seen that the notion of kinship in the New Guinean culture encompasses a wider scope of bonds. Instead of a solely biological mutuality of being – sharing the same genes, being born of the same blood, the mutuality of being required for kinship here is found in something else - sharing *kopong*. By acquiring and consuming meals together, working, and travelling to lectures together, students sharing accommodation participate deeply in each other's lives and aid each other's social development.

While the bonds formed amongst students living together may be temporal, they do conform with Sahlins' notion of mutuality of being formed through commensality. The notion of mutuality promotes that being intimately connected to one another is a specific quality of kinship. Those that form close bonds in shared student accommodation live in such close quarters, eating together around the same table, journeying to lectures together, working on the same subjects, that it can be said they become intrinsic to one another.

In *What is Kinship?* (2013) Feuchtwang sets out to analyse and understand what Sahlins truly means by mutuality of being. After all, a sense of mutuality itself does not inherently mean that there are bonds of kinship present; mutuality of being is a quality of kinship, not the other way around. His work helps to expand and broaden the long-held debate over what kinship really is. My use of the term kinship to define the relationships formed in student accommodation is admittedly a broad use of the term, but there are a number of ways in which this can be supported. Students only share in this way for a matter of a few years, however Feuchtwang remarks on the temporal nature of kinship – 'kinship mutual being is distinguished by its own temporality: the temporality of generational reproduction.' (Feuchtwang, 2013, p.284). Feuchtwang is describing the way in which each new generation recreates the 'family'. In student accommodation, this reproduction is not in terms of biological relatedness but a reproduction of the domestic within a new setting. Feuchtwang also acknowledges that friendship and kinship are not quite the same. '...relations establishing friendship and interpersonal trust, including affinity but also beyond matrilineal and same-generation conjugal kinship, are hugely important and are understood in some fundamental way to differ from "kinship."' (Feuchtwang, 2013, p.281). However, Feuchtwang is careful to point out that the actual performance of these close relationships do enact and demonstrate the mutuality of being that Sahlins describes as being at the heart of kinship. 'Yet all these are consolidated by actions creating mutual being, including those of great intimacy, the sharing of suffering, of food, of touch, and of blood in blood brotherhoods.' (Feuchtwang, 2013, p.281). The intimacy of student living

creates a mutuality and a shared identity amongst flatmates that I argue is a form of kinship. Feuchtwang also notes that this is explicitly recognised in the language describing these relationships. 'The language of kinship is used to describe the closest and best maintained of these relations of "brotherhood" and "sisterhood"' (Feuchtwang, 2013, p.281). Although this is less visible in my interview data, it is recognised more readily in the American university system in fraternity and sorority houses.

Carsten describes the process of 'becoming'; becoming a complete person, becoming kin, for the Langkawi Malay people. This process is lifelong, from birth to becoming old and having grandchildren. According to Carsten, birth is merely the beginning of the process of becoming a person and becoming kin, in contrast to many other societies where kinship is defined by descent and genetic relatedness (and often nothing else). This identity is built through living together and the sharing of food, beginning with feeding. 'Personhood, relatedness, and feeding are intimately connected' (Carsten, 1995, p.224). It is important to note that Carsten defines feeding as 'receiving as well as giving nourishment' (Carsten, 1995, p.223), not solely the act of feeding an infant, for example. Also of note is that the sources Carsten uses in this article are mainly middle-aged and older women, some of whom she knew well. This means that although the men of the village might not disagree, they may view things in slightly different ways. In my study, the respondents from flat 1 I spoke to were all women. Like Carsten's study, this could mean that the information received may be somewhat slanted. In a small scale study such as mine, it is hard to see if gender affects perceptions or practices. However, while male perspectives might differ somewhat, they may be seen as complementary instead of contradictory.

Carsten's contribution to this research can be seen most clearly in the idea that kinship can be seen as a process that is connected with food and nourishment. Drawing on the idea that where food comes from and how it is incorporated into the body is significant in terms of kinship, particularly in terms of shared substances that then become incorporated into the body. Blood and other bodily substances shared by biologically connected family members are seen to constitute bonds of kin, but the sharing of food is also the sharing of a substance, and Carsten suggests that this re-enacts the sharing of biological bodily substance, and therefore the bonds of kin. In a student flat, the sharing of food is significant and carries meaning. To eat a shared meal prepared by another member of the flat is entirely different to eating a frozen pizza for one and serves to join all the participants in ways that demonstrate and reinforce the relationship. In simple terms, a

prepared meal shared by a flatmate becomes a shared substance between two (or more) bodies. These acts may not be thought of consciously in this way, but subliminally, we are aware that sharing food creates, demonstrates, and maintains relatedness. This becomes even more obvious in cases of food-sharing avoidance, where members of a flat purposefully avoid sharing food in order to avoid building relatedness with the others. As a relationship-building process, food-sharing can be used strategically in student flats, particularly towards the beginning of the flat-sharing experience.

In her book *Performing Kinship: Narrative, Gender, and the Intimacies of Power in the Andes* (2008), Van Vleet examines the ways in which people of the various communities throughout the Andes create and perform relatedness through everyday interactions such as sharing food and space, and working together. She claims that relatedness is constantly reproduced and reinforced through these interactions, whether it is between socially created kin or whether there is blood relation. Referring to the culture of the Sullk'ata people, Van Vleet states that 'Cooking and serving food indexes not only gender identity but also adulthood and specific kinship relationships with other household members' (Van Vleet, 2009, p.164). Cooking and eating the same food together in a small kitchen, working and travelling together, all of these practices help to form and maintain this relatedness or kinship. Deriving from Weismantel, Van Vleet states that for the people of Zumbagua, Ecuador, sharing food, drink, emotional states, and close proximity create kinship. (Van Vleet, 2009, p.64). These very same practices of performative kinship can be seen amongst students living together in shared student accommodation; eating and drinking together in a small kitchen or out as a unit, and travelling to lectures or shopping together. The inclusion of adulthood here is interesting, as many first-year students are experiencing independent life outside of the family home for the first time.

Abbots and Lavis' *Why We Eat, How We Eat: Contemporary Encounters Between Food and Bodies* (2016) presents an edited volume of essays raising a theoretical discussion on the meanings of food, that are created and unmade through eating. Alongside this discussion comes an examination of the web of relations formed between food and those who eat. A uniting thread running through these essays is the notion that food is both material and symbolic at the same time. Abbots and Lavis draw attention to the ways in which many different relations are created or unmade via eating, creating a web or mesh involving eaters and the food they eat. 'Eating is framed across value systems that construe bodies and their relationships with foods in different ways (Abbots and Lavis, 2016, p.83). In

shared student accommodation, eating food that another person has prepared takes on a new significance, particularly in first year flats as those involved are typically seeking new bonds of relatedness. As time passes and the dynamics of relatedness in the flat become more set, these acts change significance again; they are now used to maintain relationships instead of bidding to create new ones.

Within the volume, Saleh presents a study of the villagers of Kefraya, Lebanon, and how they engage with their *kouroum* - their groves and vineyards, and the produce they eat from them. Saleh argues that the communal production – the cultivating and harvesting, and the consumption of this produce, builds relationships of kinship that are connected to the place and are communicated through shared memories. This study makes the important point that preparing and sharing food together in a place creates a web of relations. In the context of student shared accommodation, the student kitchen becomes the place where many of the relationships in the accommodation are formed and maintained. Through the communal preparing and eating of food, relationships are affirmed.

Abbotts' own experiences in the Ecuadorian city of Cuenca are presented in her essay *Negotiating Foreign Bodies: Migration, Trust and the Risky Business of Eating in Highland Ecuador* (2013). It examines the ways in which privileged migrants estrange themselves from local Cuenca food spaces and eating practices. The privileged migrants spoken of here are predominantly from North America and are openly known by the local Cuencanos as 'gringos'. The focus of the article itself regards the migrant's common dream of 'consuming a diet of simple, clean, and local food' (Abbotts, 2013, p.119) However, the migrant population seems catered to, with fusion restaurants and Gringo Nights now commonplace. The dream of the migrant to eat local, clean food, with a shorter production chain and less pesticides is sullied by the fact that the migrants seem to distance themselves from local eating practices over fears of the foreign, whether these are foreign bodies, spaces, or diseases. Abbotts seeks to highlight how the shared aspirations of the migrant populations are hindered by these fears, that their concerns over interacting with 'dirty' spaces or people result in an ironic avoidance of the local, short-production-chain, pesticide free food that was the aspiration for many of these migrants to journey to Cuenca in the first place. The migrant's practices for acquiring and consuming food would help to create bonds with the local population. If they were, in fact to fall in line with their intended reasons for going to Cuenca, they would shop at local marketplaces and eat the same foods as locals. However, this avoidance of unknown and foreign people and places

largely contributes to the migrants' remaining identity as different to the local culture. This article is included because it was influential in the early stages of my research in shaping my understanding of the relationship between sharing food and sharing identity. This article sits near the core of my research, as it demonstrates how eating food is intimately connected to one's identity, and that shared meals construct a shared identity through a sense of mutuality. The shared aspirations of these migrants to eat clean food are based on an idea of incorporation, that what we eat makes us who we are. Therefore, a shared meal creates a shared identity, as Sahlins notes in his discussion of *kopong* (Sahlins, 2013)

In their 2006 article *The Cultural Structuring of Mealtime Socialization*, Ochs and Shohet examine how mealtimes become a cultural site for establishing social expectations. Cultural sites are here defined as 'historically durable yet transformable, socially organized and organizing, and tempospatially situated arenas, which are laden with symbolic meanings and mediated by material artifacts.' (Ochs and Shohet, 2006, p.35). This means that to Ochs and Shohet, mealtimes are used as events in which to shape children to social expectations, to instil the cultural importance of eating together, and to develop the children's understanding of the cultural symbolism and sentiments associated with food and eating practices. Drawing example of taboo food avoidance seen amongst the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea, and comparatively, of emphasis on pleasure, coupled with a social contract to eat the meal served, Ochs and Shohet demonstrate how food and avoidance of certain food is inextricably tied to a child's development. Breast milk is a universal food for young children, but all children are weaned from the breast before adulthood, and an adult feeding in the same way is often considered taboo. Of interest in my research is the notion of mealtimes being a cultural site for establishing and developing social skills and expectations. Although the students are all adults, the setting of the student flat is completely new and so the use of mealtimes as an arena for constructing familial type relationships in this setting makes sense. In British culture, mealtimes are very closely linked to family life and the accompanying feelings of relaxed sharing, enjoyment, and friendliness.

Appadurai is important for showing how objects -in this case, food -become a form of social currency, particularly in food gifting. Food is not a neutral object. Where students are building new kinship relationships with people who were recently strangers, and sharing a flat and kitchen, food takes on a symbolic meaning. A meal is a common language and can be shared with anyone from any background or culture. Jenkins et al recognise Appadurai's

concept of objects having agency in relation to borrowing and lending. In their 2014 essay '*The messy social lives of objects: Inter-personal borrowing and the ambiguity of possession and ownership*', Jenkins et al examine the ambiguities that are formed when objects are borrowed and lent between people. These ambiguities not only lie in the ownership (and therefore identity) of the object, but in the relationships that are formed between borrower and lender. Raising the argument that goods are a common mediator in efforts to create and maintain social relationships, Jenkins et al make the point that borrowing an item blurs the boundaries of possession and ownership. Jenkins et al demonstrate how objects can be used strategically to enable and change relationships and to make visible existing relationships. 'We note that borrowing is significant in forming and maintaining relationships, but also that relationships to goods are significant in determining lending and borrowing practices.' (Jenkins et al., 2014, p.131). In the shared student kitchen, food items take on personal meanings as they are given as gifts or shared amongst the group (Jenkins et al., 2014, p.132). The kitchen equipment and crockery become tools for forming and maintaining relationships. Jenkins et al discuss the idea of the ambiguity of ownership of borrowed and lent items. In the shared student kitchen, borrowing is commonplace and the ambiguity of ownership of borrowed items reveals the development of the mutuality of being in the flat, where lives and identities are intertwined and overlapping. It is important to understand the ambiguity in networks of borrowed and lent items in order to fully appreciate the mutuality of being brought about through these networks. Jenkins et al also highlight the obligation of reciprocity brought about by borrowing and lending of items; if one borrows an object it would be rude to refuse to lend the other person something. Covert borrowing in particular is interesting; where this form of borrowing is understood and accepted, it is used strategically and demonstrates the intimacy of a relationship, but where objects are covertly borrowed against the will of the owner, if discovered it can have the opposite effect – causing rifts in a relationship.

Methodology

My study is a small-scale qualitative research project. In order to answer my question – How are kinship and food-sharing practices related in the context of a student flat? - I needed to gather types of data that showed what students were actually doing in the kitchen with their flatmates. This is not something that I would generally witness fully on

visits to students' flats, therefore it was necessary to design a method of collecting this data that would otherwise be incomplete or unavailable.

I considered a number of different data collection methods, and I decided to use interviews (see appendix ii for sample interview questions), as well as my own journal data collected as a participant observer. I also included some autoethnography from my own early years as a student living in shared accommodation. I wanted to cast a wide net to gather a broad range of information without imposing restrictions or preconceived ideas on the kind of food-sharing practices and events that occurred. I wanted the respondents to feel free to elaborate on their own experiences as much as possible, in order for my data to be rich and detailed.

The participants in the interviews consisted of both male and female university students in shared accommodation; I wanted the participants to roughly reflect the demographics of the university population. Gender may play a part in the specific nature and formation of food sharing events and practices within shared student accommodation. The students - sampled were of all university year groups, at different stages of their degrees from first-years to post-graduates. I felt this was an important feature because the nature of the use of food as a tool for forming and maintaining relationships could differ between new students and established students.

My interest in food-sharing practices developed gradually through my own observation of and participation in student meals and gatherings. As a participant observer, a portion of the data presented here includes my own journal notes describing my experiences with food-sharing practices and events.

Though food sharing events are common, and experienced to some degree by most students, there is another aspect to food-sharing which is equally as important for this research. The absence of food sharing, where food sharing events and practices do not occur in shared accommodation, may well have important implications for the relationships of the students sharing the flat. This leads me to the final aspect of my methodology; autoethnography. In my first year, I found myself sharing a flat with a number of students who actively avoided food-sharing of any sort. I found this experience frustrating, and at times, isolating, and my journal relating to this period examines the impact of the absence of food sharing on kinship relationships within the flat.

Autoethnography is a tool increasingly used by anthropologists, and it comes with a number of advantages. Wall states that writing through an autoethnographical lens can aid

a detailed examination of a subject, as every aspect of the situation can be analysed; the author has, after all, experienced it first-hand. However, the representation of the experience may be flawed; writing about personal experiences necessitates a completely objective view and avoiding biases on one's own experiences can be difficult (Wall, 2008, p.39). In my own research, my autoethnographical account of not sharing food with flatmates provided information about the other half of the story; students living together without sharing food. This was a subject which, understandably, my respondents rarely wanted to discuss, preferring to provide information on successful food sharing events. As such, autoethnography gave me the opportunity to investigate the entire situation. Wall also discusses how narratives told in autoethnographical views can change and reshape the identities and meanings of people and events (Wall 2008, p.39). While writing autoethnographically, I must be aware that my personal experiences are mine alone and my views on them or how events transpired may not be shared by others. Also related to autoethnography is my subject position. My own difficulties with communication are likely to have affected my experience within the flat, and this led to me questioning events, unsure whether I had misread a situation. Nevertheless, my account is a true reflection of my experiences at that time.

I have chosen an autoethnographical approach as a part of this research in order to make use of my own observations and experiences as a student in shared accommodation. As a student, I am well-placed to examine my own food-sharing experiences which I recognise as one of countless student flat-sharing experiences. I am aware that I am examining a phenomenon that will have many different manifestations; every student flat will have developed unique ways to share or avoid sharing food and space. As such, a focus on a selection of case studies can highlight the variety of strategies used by students in a shared kitchen, and also demonstrate the recurring principles that underly the behaviours seen.

My autoethnography is a retrospective account of my experiences within shared student accommodation during my foundation, first, and second years of university. These accounts are accurate to my own experiences, but as is always the case with academic autoethnographical writing, my own position must be taken into account. I have several specific learning differences that have social and communicative aspects; I can sometimes misread non-verbal communication. Having said that, an advantage is that because of this, I am used to reflecting on and analysing my social exchanges.

I have edited all names of the participants in my interviews, as per written agreement of privacy (see appendix i for Informed Consent form). All participants are intended to be unidentifiable. As a portion of my data relies on autoethnography, I have been careful to uphold the privacy of any person mentioned and have avoided using their real names.

‘Similar to traditional ethnographers, autoethnographers also may have to protect the privacy and safety of others by altering identifying characteristics such as circumstance, topics discussed, or characteristics like race, gender, name, place, or appearance’ (Ellis et al., 2010, p.9)

Furthermore, I have remained impartial to the best of my ability in order to view the events I experienced from an academic perspective. To write from an autoethnographical perspective means that one must be accurate and descriptive of people and events, in order to engage the reader with the material and present the narrative in a linear, coherent path. This clarity of information is what makes the events discussed lifelike and understandable or identifiable with (Ellis et al, 2010, p.10)

‘For autoethnographers, validity means that a work seeks verisimilitude; it evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible, a feeling that what has been represented could be true.’ (Ellis et al., 2010, p.10)

The following is an account of my experiences living in shared student accommodation. My first experience of living in shared student accommodation was in my foundation year of university. It was a six bedroom flat in a six flat building on campus, with en-suite bathrooms and a shared kitchen. I joined the course and moved in halfway through the academic year, when my flatmates had already been living there for six months. I do not remember having any expectation about how or what living in student accommodation would be like, as my only experience of shared living had been with my family. However, I did have an idea of a shared space, group activities, and meals cooked or eaten together in the shared kitchen. It appeared that the other flatmates had already established a way of using the shared space, whereby there was very little interaction between them. We mostly ate in our rooms having cooked different meals at different times, and dishes often piled up. Two of the flatmates, Jake and Alex, were clearly friends however I do not recall them ever cooking and eating together. The other three flatmates rarely spoke to each other and appeared to exist individually from the flat. Elliot did not mix with the rest of the

flat and avoided use of the kitchen when other flatmates were there, going so far as to eat breakfast at around 5:30am, before anyone else was awake. Timothy, although not exactly a social butterfly, was pleasant company and often invited me to play videogames while he shared his extensive range of high-end teas and coffees with me. These acts of sharing definitely contributed to our relationship in the flat, as I recall each of them more fondly than most other experiences with the rest of the flat. On the other end of the scale, the last flatmate Ross demonstrated no desire to form kinship relations within the flat and it seemed, worked against constructing them. As a result of this mismatch of ideas how the shared space should be used, very few bonds were constructed in the flat, and even less remained after we moved out. The kitchen, therefore, was a utilitarian space, and bleak in comparison to my family kitchen. In my house, the family kitchen was a social hub of the home, always full of people, with the kettle boiling or something in the oven.

In the shared kitchen, space was jealously guarded. Cupboard and fridge spaces were seized, and items placed in another's cupboard were usually moved or removed. Ross would go so far as to threaten to throw repeatedly offending food items away if he kept finding them on his usually mostly empty shelf in the fridge. There was no sense of community in the kitchen; often it would be stacked full of dirty dishes but if someone had family visiting then you could expect to find a stack of your dishes outside your door. An example of this springs to mind as one of the first experiences I had in the flat. As I had arrived partway through the year, I was not party to the establishment of the rules of the flat, and on one of my first days I recall asking Jake and Alex if there was anything we used communally. This was taken as me not having brought my own equipment and asking to use everyone else's pans and dishes which was not taken positively. This did not help me make a good first impression and immediately revealed the boundaries and restrictions on sharing within the flat. Aside from washing up liquid, sponges, and paper towels, no items were shared communally. Ross had seemed to appoint himself an authority over the rules of the kitchen and flat, and this set a business-like tone which discouraged familiarity and sharing.

I made several attempts to share food during my time in shared accommodation, suggesting possible flat meals and offering cake such as banana bread and chocolate brownies to my flatmates. However, these offers were almost invariably turned down, or in one case, my flatmate accepted my offer to save them a piece; I later found it still in the fridge weeks later having gone mouldy, and I had to throw it out. This was disheartening and I found myself relying less on food as a tool for social negotiation with members of the

flat. In reflection, I find myself with a sense of regret that my relationships within shared student accommodation were so isolating and unsatisfactory. Happily, I was able to develop friendships outside of the flat, and some of these have developed to include curry nights with student friends, hosted in my own house outside of accommodation. On another occasion, I was with student friends in their on-campus shared accommodation, and accidentally broke my new bottle of expensive alcohol on the kitchen floor. Although student loans had just been paid in and I could easily afford another, it was a pleasant and reassuring surprise when one of the members of the flat collected donations from the friend group to buy me another bottle. This was an obvious gesture of familiarity and kinship as they were all aware that me purchasing another bottle was not an issue, as we had all received our loans. This act demonstrated depth of relationship and bonds of kinship.

Discussion of Findings

The small scale of my study cannot provide an exhaustive account of all student food-based sharing practices. However, what it does provide is a detailed examination of the actual practices of three different groups of students. The practices are likely to be a representative sample of the food-sharing practices of students in general; although my study cannot comment on every kind of food-sharing practice students perform, it does demonstrate the creativity and inventiveness of students in developing unique ways of sharing food and space. It is established that, for the purposes of this research, the term 'kinship' is being used not to indicate a biological relationship but a socially constructed relatedness and shared identity, that has as an intrinsic quality Sahlins' notion of mutuality of being. The data demonstrates the strategic use of food-sharing for the negotiation and reaffirmation of this kinship.

I began by conducting interviews with two groups of students living in shared accommodation, each group attending a different university.

The first interviews were conducted with three female participants; Rosie, Gemma, and Taylor (all pseudonyms) who are second year undergraduate students living in a shared flat with three others: two boys and another girl (Paul, Damien, and Suzie, also pseudonyms).

The four girls had all lived together the previous year. It was clear from the very beginning that the girls were close friends; there was much laughter and banter throughout the interview, and they often interrupted and spoke over each other to add details or agreement. The interview was full of anecdotes and they appeared very comfortable sharing their stories of life in the student kitchen.

The second interviews were conducted with a group of third-year undergraduate students living in off-campus private student accommodation. Having lived separately in multiple accommodations previously, the group moved in together after cementing bonds outside of the house. The house consists of a close-knit group of students who tend to socialise almost exclusively within their group. Food sharing events involving other flats or external friends are less common. Although the group did not live or share together in first and second year, they purposefully engineered living together in the third year. Being a third-year house of students that have already bonded, shared meals are used less as a tool for creating relationships between the members, and more as an occasional event to maintain these bonds.

A key aim was to establish what kind of food sharing practices exist within shared student accommodation. To do this, I used data taken from the two interviews with groups of flat-sharing students, and my own autoethnographical experience of sharing a flat. The data was able to show a broad range of practices relating to food-sharing and avoidance of sharing that underpinned the link between kinship and food-sharing. I also set out to explore the notion that kinship and food are inextricably linked, and the data demonstrated that this is indeed so. The concept of performing kinship described by Van Vleet (2009, p.64) was evident in a number of the various different food sharing practices described in the interviews. The data showed that food sharing practices were extremely varied. Food sharing and avoidance of food sharing were both evident. The food sharing practices included the ongoing and open sharing of everyday foods and basic equipment, as well as food and items being kept for exclusive personal use. Food-sharing events ranged from everyday interactions to special annual events. The types of food sharing included were take-away meals, movie nights involving snacks and drinks, everyday meals, whole flat dinners, baked goods and treats to share, the special baking of gifts and birthday cakes for individuals, and whole flat and inter-flat celebratory events.

The data revealed how ongoing and regular day-to-day food-sharing practices serve to reproduce and reinforce a sense of relatedness between the members of the flat. It was

explicitly recognised that food sharing could be used to develop kinship bonds. The interview with the girls' flat revealed that their food sharing practices had originated in their first year, where their friendship group had begun to define itself over shared meals around the table. The friendship group developed communal space, shared use of dishes, sharing ingredients, and social food activities. This happened over time, with flat meals originally being used as a means to enable socialising with one another.

"Yes, we made an effort to arrange flat meals regularly so that we could socialise and bond as a flat" Gemma

By the second year, the bonds were established and this type of enabling was not so necessary. This clearly shows that the flatmates were aware that meals were a key event in the formation of kinship bonds, in the way that Ochs and Shohet describe in their 2006 article (Ochs and Shohet, 2006). Mealtimes are particularly embedded in family life, and these findings show the members of the flat purposefully chose to enact this everyday family ritual for the express purpose of recreating their family bonds away from home. One member did not partake in these attempts to build relationships and was not a part of the group in the second year, when the girls moved into another flat together.

In the third year flat, kinship bonds had already been established in previous accommodation, so food-sharing and meals were used less as tools to form kinship bonds, and more as ways to maintain the relationships already formed. In this flat, it was the relationships between couples where food was shared most prolifically. Ian and Jessica have been together for a year and a half and have an established pattern of regular shopping, cooking, and eating together. Even though Jessica suffers from a serious intolerance to lactose products, they work around this to eat together as a couple. Etta and Ryan are also in a relationship and eat together around once a week. In this case, Etta cooks the meal and Ryan washes the dishes afterwards. When asked why this was different to other food-sharing in the house, the answer "Because they're in a relationship" was given. This directly highlights the link between strong relationships and the sharing of meals. Gemma described a friend of hers who lived in accommodation with her boyfriend. This couple regularly shopped together, took turns cooking, and divided their food extremely meticulously.

'They were hilarious, I once saw them sit and count out a bag of Haribo so they both had an equal amount!' Gemma

This was a strongly established relationship and the food-sharing practices were well defined. The food sharing practices that couples demonstrated were clearly different and more intimate. Couples shared more regularly and in a more day-to-day domestic fashion, and this appears to reflect a clear and established pattern of relaxed intimacy. Although members of the third year house tend to value having their own space, when space must be negotiated it is couples that share, over less directly related members of the house. Ian and Jessica have elected to share a cupboard, which is jam-packed with kitchen equipment and crockery, as Ian is a keen cook with a large collection of equipment. This suggests that the couple bond is strong and involves trust enough to share domestic space.

Within the girls' flat, some food sharing relationships have developed between pairs of flatmates who are not couples. Gemma and Taylor often cook together, and Rosie shares some of her food with Paul. Outside of these individual relationship dynamics, equal relationships between members of the flat were clear. When takeaway foods are bought in, members of the flat often pair up to share a meal.

The most powerful evidence for the implicit understanding of the value of food sharing in the construction of kinship can be seen in the food sharing *avoidance* strategies that my research shed light on. Some students went to extreme lengths to avoid sharing food – and therefore avoid building relationships. My own experience offering banana bread and chocolate brownies are a strong example. In my own mind I saw these acts as offerings of friendship. However, the rejection of my offerings was a clear attempt to avoid changing the status quo regarding our relationships, and no bonds were established. The food sharing avoidance strategies of one particular flatmate went even further beyond simply not sharing food or partaking in shared food. This extended to avoiding use of the kitchen altogether when anyone else was in there, eating breakfast before any other flat member was even awake. The kitchen itself as a location is significant; in many homes, it is the heart of the home. In the case of this particular student, it was as if the kitchen was avoided because, as a shared space, it had the potential for creating kinship that was not desired. Perhaps Sahlins' mutuality of being is too difficult to avoid in such a space as a shared kitchen. In the girls' flat, they reported a similar experience in the first year, where one student did not mix socially with the group.

"They would get up ridiculously early to eat breakfast on their own and avoided using the kitchen when we were in there" Taylor

As a result, this student did not stay a part of the group when the girls moved into a different flat the following year.

As kinship develops and friendships strengthen, there is a consequent relaxation of exclusive ownership of space, utensils, and certain foods. There was a relaxed degree of trust in the flat for all members to uphold the unwritten rules of the flat, and the borrowing practices surrounding food and other kitchen items here reflect that. Borrowed items would always be replaced or returned the way they were found. However, as Taylor only owned a few dishes, she kept hers separately simply so that she did not have to find or wash one each time she ate.

'I take my plates out because I got tired of having no dishes, I only have about two plates.'

Taylor

Borrowing and lending amongst students in this way creates a net of reciprocity and obligations to be fulfilled. The act of borrowing and lending items engenders opportunities for trust to be built and relationships to develop. Jenkins et al describe the agency that borrowed and lent items possess as symbols of relatedness. 'The implication is that borrowing creates and maintains on-going relationships between people.' (Jenkins et al., 2014, p.135). The relaxed degree of trust in the flat was facilitated by the creation of a list hung in the kitchen, of each person in the flat's allergies and dietary requirements and restrictions, along with dislikes. The sharing relationship takes time to establish, and the boys' relationship with the girls in the flat is different, as the trust and reciprocity has not been fully established.

'They just eat differently' Rosie

Perhaps these boys are not as confident in cooking, and therefore do not have the skills to use food as a way of forging these relationships in the way the girls do. The boys are more likely to take it in turns buying takeaway, but not taking turns to cook meals.

Kinship in the flat is evident in the nurturing relationships that develop over time. Gender differences and patterns emerge in the nurturing relationships that are typical of families. The girls in the flat highlighted a difference in sharing and eating practices between the male and the female members. Rosie felt that the boys were lazier and less inclined to eat well, describing her experiences with Paul.

'I offer to get shopping for him, and often share my food with him.' Rosie

The girls stated that the boys do share amongst themselves but mostly in snack foods and takeaway meals, and this was bought alternately, each taking it in turns to pay. Amongst the girls, there seems to be a general feeling of motherly or sisterly care for the boys, making sure they were eating well. Performing kinship in this way, according to Van Vleet, not only reinforces and creates the familial bonds in the flat; relationships become naturalised through this acting out of traditional familial roles (Van Vleet, 2009, p.64). From the interview, it was clear that the girls felt that they needed to look after the boys in the flat, but there also seemed to be elements of a hierarchy present – Rosie stated that she shares “scraps” with Paul, which implies that Rosie and likely the other girls perhaps view themselves at a higher standing within the flat group relationship than the boys. The boys also owe money to the girls for shopping done for them, which the girls seemed content not to ask for. The girls feel they need to look after the boys, and elements of traditional gender roles emerge as the boys allow the girls to take responsibility, mothering them and taking over lighter domestic duties. Here, elements of Carsten’s idea of feeding as a generator of kinship are clear, with students both feeding together and being fed by others. (Carsten, 1995, p.1)

There was also discussion of a slightly convoluted mothering relationship between some female members of the flat. The three girls felt a shared responsibility for helping Suzie develop her life skills, and her developing ability to cook and understanding of food was mentioned by the participants here. Food sharing could also sometimes appear as a form of provision for the group. In the girls’ flat, Rosie described shopping for others who would eat poorly otherwise. Other acts were evident forms of provision, such as bringing food into the flat to share, taking turns bringing the takeaway, and Taylor sharing windfalls from her parent’s professional baking, such as trays of brownies.

The girls’ flat described direct attempts to demonstrate friendship through sharing food. Some members enjoyed cooking and would bake special goods to share. Taylor, for example, would bake birthday cakes for members of the flat, and also for friends living in other flats. More regular events such as movie nights always involved food sharing, with each participant typically bringing something to share. This type of sharing stands out as a special demonstration of a cherished relationship. The special relationship is performed and reinforced through the act of giving and sharing.

Another type of special food-sharing event was described in the interviews with both the second and third year students groups, and these were special celebratory events. Three special events were discussed in the interview with the girls' flat; Pancake Day, Christmas dinner, and a 'funeral' marking the end of the first year. These events included acts of sharing such as each person contributing a dish (and the responsibility of shopping for it), helping to cook, or bringing booze for the group. Kitchen equipment and utensils were openly shared, and guests brought their own plates and cutlery out of necessity. The significance of these special events in the flat should not be underestimated; the very purpose of the events are to construct, maintain, and celebrate the relationships between the members. The girls' use of the term 'funeral' to describe the ending of their first year evokes a sense of poignancy, and funerals are laden with symbols of kinship. Members of a family gather together to mourn and cherish things that once were, and these events often bring a group closer together, strengthening their bonds and depth of feelings. Although there was no casket, the ceremonial ending of the year that brought the group together was over, and the funeral did strengthen the bonds of the group. Domestic rituals such as this help to reinforce the collective identity of the flat, just in the same way that Christmas dinner collects together and celebrates the family. It is important that all members share these events and it is understood as a collective bonding experience.

The third year housemates also described an event where food was shared as a domestic ritual. Many of the members of the house had clashing dietary requirements, choices, or intolerances, and therefore meals were rarely cooked as a full house. A Christmas meal, however, was held in the house, with each member voting democratically on a poll to decide what meats, vegetables, etc. everyone wanted to (or was able to) eat. It was collaborative, with three members helping to cook the food. On occasion, BBQ's were also held in a similar way, with everyone bringing items to share. Events such as these were incorporative of those who had no money or anything to contribute, as it was about "making the night better". The democratic way in which the group chose the food for the night reflects and reinforces aspects of the nature of the relationship between the housemates – a group of equal peers, like siblings. This is particularly significant, as due to the multiple food intolerances present in the house, the group rarely cooked one meal together. However, they still felt that it was important to make the effort to have such a celebration despite all of the clashing dietary requirements and intolerances.

'Given intolerances and dietary choices, cooking as a house would be incredibly time consuming and difficult to handle. We cook separately out of ease.' Ian

Although the group did not cook together often, food sharing was still very much present in the house. Therefore, the lack of meal sharing is due to practicalities as opposed to a refusal to build kinship amongst the house members. These special events are important in the construction of the flat identity, and this identity is further developed through extending hospitality to other flats.

Regular events such as movie nights and takeaways were not always restricted solely to those living in the flat; sometimes they involved members of different flats, and when this occurred, refusing to share with non-members of the group just did not happen. Gifts such as Taylor's birthday cakes were also not restricted to the flat, and baked goods were shared with visiting friends. These events not only created relationships with those outside of the flat, but all of the members hosting worked to reinforce the group identity of the flat as a unit by extending hospitality as a group.

Conclusion

This research set out to investigate how the food-sharing practices of students in shared accommodation are connected to the development of kinship bonds. The data gathered includes interviews, autoethnography, and participant observation, and is able to give a sample of the food sharing practices amongst students. From this, it is indicative that these practices are extremely varied. The research makes use of Sahlins' concept of mutuality of being (Sahlins, 2011) as a framework for understanding the kinship relations between students, and takes inspiration from a number of ethnographies concerning commensality and meals as a social tool (Abbots and Lavis, 2016, Carsten, 1995, Ochs and Shohet, 2006, Van Vleet, 2009). The research is also indebted to the work of Appadurai (1986) for his theory on the social agency of objects, and to Jenkins et al (2014) for their invaluable study on student borrowing and lending practices, which helped to shape the research design.

My interviews were conversational and unstructured to allow my participants to communicate freely and discuss actual food-sharing practices with as little direction from me as possible. The data, while not exhaustive, was able to show that the acts of food-sharing seen between students in shared accommodation are directly linked to the negotiation, formation and maintenance of the kinship bonds formed. Food-sharing

practices are at the centre of relatedness in these student flats, and the everyday occurrences of sharing food, space, and equipment in a kitchen reproduces and reinforces kinship. Many of the food-sharing acts performed by the students I interviewed were performed with the knowledge that this had the potential to build relatedness, and some were intentional attempts to create these bonds. I believe that the strongest demonstration of this knowledge lies in the strategies of food sharing avoidance that were revealed in my data.

Mealtimes are an intrinsic aspect of families living together, and my findings show that students in shared accommodation often intentionally perform these familial acts with intent to reproduce the kinship they lived with before moving to university. Direct endeavours to demonstrate relatedness such as sharing homemade baked goods highlight the students' awareness of the effect of such acts. A strong kinship relationship takes time to negotiate and build. As this sharing relationship strengthens, the boundaries around shared food items relax and the kitchen, utilities, and foods are shared more liberally. After the students had been a close group long enough for the bonds to be established, both groups reported that the acts they had earlier performed to enable the creation of kinship were not so necessary. This also highlights that students are aware of the importance of meals in the formation of kinship. Couples demonstrate strongly defined and intimate food sharing practices that reflect close kinship. Rather than an intimate partner-based sharing, some students develop nurturing relationships with members of their flat. The most prominent kinship relationship that appears in shared student accommodation is one of a family of peers. This collective identity is reinforced by acts reproducing special family events, and further by hosting other students as a familial group.

Taken together, the evidence from this research suggests that food sharing is intimately linked with the development of kinship. It is a commonly held belief that the friendships developed at university are often lifelong and significant. The findings of my research seem to suggest that perhaps it is the intimate, mutual living experience that creates a lifelong bond so deep that it replicates kinship. The current study was limited by the small-scale nature of my research, and data from a larger sample could have revealed a wider variety of sharing practices. The results of my research showed that the first year in shared accommodation is where food sharing strategies were most deployed to develop kinship, and this area of research is an intriguing one that I may explore in further research. Student accommodation is certainly unique in providing an environment where one leaves home to live communally and intimately with a group of strangers; this particular situation is rarely

found anywhere else. Notwithstanding that my research can only provide a small sample of the food sharing practices that occur in shared accommodation, it does confirm that the kitchen is a powerful setting for negotiating kinship, and that food is often to be found at the heart of kinship relatedness.

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Appendices

Appendix i.

Informed Consent Form

Information

This is an Informed Consent Form for undergraduate students who currently study at University. Students are invited to participate in research titled:

Kitchens and Kinship: Student Food Sharing Practices in Shared Accommodation

The research is a small-scale qualitative study conducted by Daegan Simpson as part of a BA Anthropological Dissertation. Participants will be interviewed in person or via internet communication.

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary and you are free to withdraw from participation at any time. You may talk to anyone you feel comfortable talking with about the research. If any aspect of your participation is not clear please feel free to ask questions at any time and every effort will be made to make this clear.

Purpose of the Research

The aim is to establish what the food-sharing practices of students are in shared accommodation and how they relate to the formation and/or negotiation of kinship-like relationships and friendships. Part of this involves understanding the role of food as an agent for social negotiation. Food, for students, is far from a neutral commodity; it dominates much of our thoughts. A student kitchen in shared accommodation is a minefield for food-based social etiquette. Food is jealously

guarded, and cupboard and fridge space can become disputed territory. Related responsibilities such as cleaning the kitchen and fridge, bins, and washing dishes can also create frictions. Students become adept at developing systems for negotiation of the shared space, and out of this, food-sharing practices develop. These practices undoubtedly cement relationships and form kinship bonds within the flat. I want to examine kinship and food sharing practices, and the agency of food within the relationships formed.

You are being invited to participate in this research because your experience as a student can contribute much to my understanding of kinship through food-sharing practices.

All information recorded is confidential and no one else except myself (Daegan Simpson) will have access to the information documented during your interview or from your reading diary. The entire interview will be recorded but no one will be identified by name on the recording. The recordings will be stored on a secure laptop and will not be shared. The recordings will be destroyed after 9th September 2019. Any information recorded will have a number on it for identification rather than your name.

For any further information or queries my contact details are:

Daegan Simpson

1003107@student.uwtsd.ac.uk

Mob: 07539964523

Certificate of Consent

I have read the foregoing information, or it has been read to me. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about it and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study.

Print Name of Participant _____

Signature of Participant _____

Date _____

Day/month/year

I have accurately read out the information sheet to the potential participant.

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

A copy of this Informed Consent form has been provided to the participant.

Print Name of Investigator: Daegan Simpson

Signature of Investigator: _____

Date _____

Day/month/year

Appendix ii.

Sample interview questions:

Do you cook and eat in your flat?

Can you describe the meals you cook together with flatmates and/or other students?

In what ways do the members of your flat/group share food?

Can you describe any events where your flat sit and eat together as a group?

How do you manage kitchen storage of food and cooking utensils?

Can you describe how items are communal/commonly shared/never shared in your flat?

What sort of food sharing events happen in your flat, and how often?

Can you describe your student kitchen and what happens there?