Food Sharing Activism in London: a preliminary reflection on collaborative participant observation

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Outline

- Introducing SHARECITY research project
- Case studies in London
- Preliminary reflection on collaborative participant observation
- Implications and challenges
- Final remarks
SHARECITY

SHARECITY is a 5-year research project funded by the European Research Council which is exploring the practice and sustainability potential of city-based food sharing economies.

**Aims & Objectives**

To establish the **significance** and **potential** of food sharing economies to transform cities onto more sustainable pathways

1) Develop **deeper theoretical** understanding of contemporary food sharing

2) Generate **comparative international empirical** data about food sharing activities within cities

3) Assess the **impact** of food sharing activities

4) Explore how food sharing in cities might **evolve** in the future
SHARECITY Research Phases

A. Development of Concepts, Framework, & Database
   - Identification of 100 Cities
   - Designing Database
   - Searching for initiatives
   - Analysing the database

B. In-Depth Ethnographies
   Complete
   September 2015 – December 2016

C. Co-Designing Assessment
   Currently in Phase B
   January 2017 – April 2018

D. Integration, Analysis, & Futures
   2018 – 2019
   2019 - 2020
Sharing

SHARING AS AN EVERYDAY SOCIAL PRACTICE
Sharing a meal with friends and family; sharing a kitchen with colleagues
Historically well researched

SHARING ECONOMIES
Stretching contemporary sharing into new spaces and scales

SUSTAINABILITY CLAIMS BUT LIMITED EVIDENCE BASE
“a means to build community, to distribute (and re-distribute) resources more efficiently, to tread more lightly on our environment” (Gaskins, 2010)

SHARECITY INNOVATION
Opening up new research horizons and building evidence of food sharing
What do we mean by food sharing?

- Have a portion of FOOD with another or others; [shared consumption]
- Give a portion of FOOD to others; [gifting]
- Use, occupy, or enjoy FOOD jointly; [shared use of space & experiences]
- Possess an interest in FOOD in common; [shared interest]
- Tell someone about FOOD [shared knowledge/skills]

**Community gardens**, CSAs, soup kitchens, food banks, potluck, meal sharing apps, collective buying schemes, food rescue, cooperatives, **community** kitchens, **gleaning**, foraging, dumpster diving, **land** and yard sharing, tool libraries, seed exchanges, **food swaps**, food **education** programs, **skill** shares, **fermentation** club, urban beekeeping guilds, meetup groups, food **mapping** sites.
The SHARECITY100 Database

Interactive Searchable Database: www.sharecity.ie/research/sharecity100-database/

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CITY</th>
<th>WHAT IS SHARED</th>
<th>HOW IT IS SHARED</th>
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Top 10
- London 201
- New York City 185
- Melbourne 144
- Berlin 133
- Sydney 108
- Barcelona 106
- Philadelphia 81
- Chicago 72
- Buenos Aires 70
- Vancouver 68

4008 food sharing activities on map List View
Case studies in London

1. OLIO EX
2. Skip Garden and Kitchen by Global Generation
3. Be Enriched and Brixton’s People Kitchen
4. Community Shop
Brixton People's Kitchen

Today's Menu

Soup
Community kitchens in South London

- The Battersea Canteen
- The Castle Canteen
- The Graveney Canteen
Community Shop

more than just food
Previous Experience as Food Waste Activist

1. Dinner Exchange
   London
2. Disco Soups
3. Feeding the 5000
   Milan
Cooking surplus food in community kitchens

“The last thing a chef wants in a line cook is an innovator, somebody with ideas of his own who is going to mess around with the chef's recipes and presentations. Chefs require blind, near-fanatical loyalty, a strong back and an automaton-like consistency of execution under battlefield conditions”
Anthony Bourdain, *Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly*

This definition of a line cook has nothing in common with cooking surplus.

Cooking surplus requires:
- Creativity
- Flexibility
- Imagination
- The willingness to improvise with the belief that “‘what you have is what you need”
Why collaborative participant observation?

“Collaborative participation presupposes an endeavour of transformation” (Rabinow and Stavrianakis 2013, 33).
Making our hands dirty: Implications

- Ethical concerns
- Critical distance
- Positionality
- Accountability
Challenges

How do we produce work that is “meaningful to the community organizations and struggles with which they work” while meeting academic standards? (Urla & Helepololei 2014:446)
"Ethnology is like fishing; all you need is a net to swing, and you can be sure that you'll catch something. Marcel Mauss.

Mauss' words capture something of the open-endedness and possibilities for surprise that anthropological research usually raises. They identify one of the great intellectual pleasures of the fieldwork experience, as well as one of the great methodological strengths of the anthropological tradition. But Mauss' observation also, I have come to appreciate, implies an absence of control that may not be so pleasurable.

The researcher is not in charge and cannot choose what strange and terrible creature may turn up in the net. And when it comes time to inspect the haul, it is not always so clear: did you catch it, or did it catch you?"  Ferguson (1999, 17-18)
Thank you!

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