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BNU Research and Enterprise Conference 2024

Empowerment Through Research: Bridging Academia and Society

The Women Eat Last

Traditions, Table Manners, and Gender Narratives at the Romanian Dining Table

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Introduction

Rooted in a rich history, with decades of oppressive politics and patriarchal displays of power, Romanian culture is shaped by complex narratives of resistance, endurance, adaptation, and transformation. Traditionalist gender discourses in Romanian culture portray women as heroic mothers and outstanding housewives, expected to sacrifice their own personal aspirations and lifestyle for the higher cause of wellbeing of others (Anghel and Dobay, 2018; Chytkova, 2011). In contrast, in the westernised, post-communist Romanian culture, women are often represented as free from imposed patriarchal gender roles, and embracing a more individualistic, self-centered attitude (Bucur and Miroiu, 2018).

Despite home-cooked food being at the core of Romanian traditional eating practices, socio-cultural and anthropological research on women's role in sourcing, preparation, and serving of food is scarce. While several studies investigate issues related to gender equality in post-communist Romania, these are mostly situated within broader political, religious, and economic contexts (Oprica, 2008) or within the binary stereotype of good (domestic, passive) / bad (evil, seductive) (Ursa, 2015).

Aim and Objectives

With this study I aim to uncover contemporary gender role narratives and family dynamics by investigating table manners, rules, rituals, and traditions at the Romanian dining table. I explore the evolution of eating practices in Romanian culture through the lens of migration, drawing from my own experiences as a Romanian immigrant in the United Kingdom (UK) as well as from the experiences of other Romanians living either in the native country or in the UK. By blending elements of migration and acculturation, this study provides a nuanced perspective on the development and evolution of gender role narratives both from migrant and non-migrant perspectives.

Study Design

- Semi-structured interviews (5 Romanian-born participants living either in Romania or in UK).
- Critical thematic analysis (Lawless and Chen, 2018), a two-stage coding process: (1) open coding to identify recurrent themes and (2) closed coding to identify recurring ideologies.
- Insider position (Charmaz, 2000)
- Reflexivity

Table 1: Recurrent themes and ideologies in Romanian dining practices

Coding phase	Open coding (repeated, recurrent themes)	Closed coding (repeated, recurrent ideologies, positions of power, status hierarchies)
Findings/interpretation	• Adaptation • Sacrifice • Pride • Identity • Traditional norms • Modern (Western) norms • Assimilation	• Gender-based hierarchies • Gender identity negotiation • Marital status hierarchies • Gendered power dynamics

source: developed by the author.

Findings & Further Research

Romanian society still maintains a rather conservative, traditional attitude, with clearly defined gender roles with regards to rules and rituals in the context of family dinners. Although less prominent than it was in the past, there is an expectation that women are more involved in food related household tasks and have a responsibility for organising mealtimes. This supports the hypothesis of gender identity being socially constructed and reinforced through societal norms and expectations (Freud 1994). It is important to acknowledge that these perceptions are changing, as societal attitudes toward gender roles continue to shift, with more individuals challenging traditional norms and engaging in cooking and domestic duties regardless of gender.

Further research could investigate traditions, table manners and gender gender-related power dynamics within the context of transnational families. Studies could further explore the topic through the lens of culinary capital, considering dimensions of class and social status.

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Banner: Adobe Stock (2024) institutional licence.
Main body: traditional Romanian dishes (left: papanasi; right: stuffed peppers): author's personal archive.

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