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Car Mun Kok
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, carmun@huskers.unl.edu

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EXPLORING FAMILIAL THEMES IN MALAYSIAN STUDENTS' EATING BEHAVIORS

by

Car Mun Kok

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Science

Major: Child, Youth, and Family Studies

Under the Supervision of Professor Julia Torquati

and Professor Maria de Guzman

Lincoln, Nebraska

May, 2011

EXPLORING FAMILIAL THEMES IN

MALAYSIAN STUDENTS' EATING BEHAVIORS

Car Mun Kok, M.S.

University of Nebraska, 2011

Adviser: Julia Torquati and Maria de Guzman

As international students, Malaysian students have the added stress of adapting to new food as well as to the responsibilities of preparing their own meals. Failure to do so would jeopardize the health and studies of Malaysian students. In order to address this problem, the purpose of this study was to explore and understand the role of family on the eating behaviors and food choices of Malaysian students who live apart from their families. Five Malaysian students at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln were interviewed. Six themes were identified in this study; "family plays an important role," "family mealtimes," parental preferences and decision-making, parental advice, "lasting habits," and culture and family history. These findings would be useful to encourage Malaysian families to practice good eating habits with students since young and continue to keep checking in with students regarding their eating behaviors, especially when they are studying overseas.

Exploring Familial Themes in Malaysian Students' Eating Behaviors

Food and eating behaviors play important roles in a student's physical, mental, and emotional well-being. This is especially true for college and university students who often practice poor eating habits and experience large amounts of stress during this time in life (Jackson, Berry, & Kennedy, 2009). When such stress is accompanied by a poor and inadequate diet, the health of students is in jeopardy (Jackson et al., 2009). As international students, Malaysian students have the added stressors of facing cultural adjustment, one of which is adapting to new food and learning nutritional information about such food (Perez-Cueto, Verbeke, Lachat, & Winter, 2009) as well as the responsibility to purchase and prepare their own meals if they live off campus. Pan, Dixon, Himburg, and Huffman (1999) found that after staying in the U.S., Asian international students consumed less breakfast than when they were in their home countries, consumed large amounts of salty and sweet snacks, ate more fast food, consumed more fats and dairy products, and consumed less vegetables and meat. Therefore, it is important to explore if family takes any part of or plays any role in the food-related behaviors of Malaysian international students and to see if family could serve as a protective factor or contribute to Malaysian students' healthy eating, given the stressors that they face as students in a foreign country. As a Malaysian student myself, I can relate to the difficulty of adapting to new food and how family support can play a role in encouraging me to make healthier food choices so I can study well and stay healthy in a foreign country.

Past studies have shown that family has some influence on individuals' food-related attitudes and behaviors. According to Pliner (1983), after their struggle for

autonomy and independence, adolescents eventually preferred the same foods as their parents (as cited in Branen & Fletcher, 1999). Rozin, Fallon, and Mandell (1984) found smaller parent-child correlations for food preferences and for liking food in general and larger correlations for food dislikes and disgust sensitivity. It was theorized that this could be the result of childhood socializing experiences or parental modeling (Rozin, et al., 1984). Counihan (1992) also found that family was one of the main sources of adolescents' ideas about and values of food came from (as cited in Branen & Fletcher, 1999). In a study of a 1000 undergraduate students, Branen and Fletcher (1999) found that food habits like eating dessert, finishing everything on one's plate, and having regular meals were formed during childhood from the way they were fed by caregivers and these eating habits persisted into adolescence and adulthood. Parental control of eating (external control; e.g., forcing a child to finish up all the food on his/her plate) predicted a lack of self-control (lack of internal control) in adolescence as external control and eating carries over from childhood into adolescence (Branen & Fletcher, 1999). Francis and Birch (2005) also found that parents' excessive control over children's weight and eating behaviors inhibits children's development of self-regulation over food and eating.

Besides direct modeling or socialization of food choices and eating behaviors, family can also influence one's eating behaviors by providing nutritional information. Hertzler and Frary (1995) found that family was the most commonly used nutritional knowledge network for college students. College students rated family as the highest nutritional knowledge network – even higher than consumer marketing, media, and teenage educational networks (Hertzler & Frary, 1995). This highlighted the importance

of family in educating children and adolescents about food and nutrition. Because students were less receptive to teenage educational networks and authorities like dieticians and home economists, family plays an important role to ensure students get the right nutritional knowledge to aid their independent food choices (Hertzler & Frary, 1995).

Studies have also shown that it is important for families to educate children about food from a young age because that is the time that children are most likely to eat at home with their families and certain food behaviors and habits carry on until adulthood. In a study on fruit and vegetable consumption among fourth- and fifth-graders, Gross, Pollock and Braun (2010) found that students who reported a greater role and engagement in grocery shopping (e.g., listing down their favorite fruit and vegetable on the grocery list, grocery shopping together with family) consumed more fruits and vegetables compared with their peers who did not have such engagement. Students who had parental support and encouragement in fruit and vegetable consumption also consumed more fruits and vegetables compared to their peers who did not have such parental support (Gross et al., 2010). Accessibility and participation in fruit- and vegetable-related activities also increased fourth- and fifth-graders' consumption of such foods. Taking note of the importance of family for instilling good eating behaviors during childhood, Deshpande, Basil, and Basil (2009) noted that people often form their tastes for food as well as food habits and behaviors at a relatively young age. Therefore, parents are advised to begin encouraging and instilling good and healthy eating habits as young as possible (Deshpande et al., 2009).

Other than the direct influences of family on children's and adolescents' eating behaviors, there have been many studies on how family indirectly affects children's and adolescents' eating – be it over-eating (binge eating) or not eating (anorexia nervosa). There have been extensive studies on how family plays a role in disordered eating, a type of eating behavior seen in children and adolescents which carries over to adulthood. Families of anorexics were found to be rigid, controlling, high in enmeshment, secretive and conflict avoidant (Dalzell, 2000; Shugar & Krueger, 1994; Vidović, Jureša, Begovac, Mahnik, & Tocilj, 2005). Families of bulimics tend to be high in conflict, low in cohesiveness and communication, and highly disorganized and dysfunctional (Crowther, Kichler, Sherwood, & Kuhnert, 2002; McNamara & Loveman, 1990; Shisslak, McKeon, & Crago; 1990). Ganley (1992) found that obese individuals had families who were more rigid and uninvolved compared to normal-weight individuals and might seek comfort from food due to their disengaged families. Francis and Birch (2005) also found that mothers' high restriction of their daughters' snack consumptions and encouragement of their daughters' weight loss were related to their daughters' unhealthy restrained eating. Therefore, these studies show that not only is family important in portraying the right eating habits but family is equally important in preventing bad eating habits.

Besides disordered eating, there have also been studies on the mediating or indirect role of family on individuals' healthy eating habits. In a study with 9 to 10 year old girls, Franko, Thompson, Bauserman, Affenito, & Striegel-Moore (2008) found that girls who reported greater family cohesion consumed breakfast frequently, consumed less soda, and had higher milk, fruits, and vegetables consumption. Having close bonds to

family might increase the likelihood that children and adolescents accept parental advice on healthy eating (Franko et al., 2008).

A cultural aspect also emerged from research on family and disordered eating. In studying the enmeshment factor for disordered eating in culturally independent and culturally interdependent communities, Tomiyama and Mann (2008) found that enmeshment was related to disordered eating in culturally independent participants but not in culturally interdependent participants. Enmeshment was positively associated with eating pathology in culturally independent participants but there was no such association in culturally interdependent participants (Tomiyama & Mann, 2008). Therefore, the common view of enmeshment as pathological is not necessarily true in a different cultural context (Tomiyama & Mann, 2008).

Given the importance of family on individuals' eating behaviors, it should be extensively studied. However, most of the studies in the field of family and eating behaviors have focused on families of individuals with eating disorders. There are not as many studies focusing on the role of family on individuals' typical eating behaviors, with the majority of them being studies conducted in the 1980s. Among the studies done on family and eating behaviors, there are even fewer studies done with Asian international students, let alone Malaysian international students. Such studies are needed because the role of family on Malaysian students' eating behaviors might differ from other American and international students living in the U.S. Given the interdependent, collectivistic Malaysian culture, the role of family on Malaysian students' eating behaviors should be important, if not more so than other individualistic cultures. With the increasing number of Malaysian international students in the U.S., it is important to understand how family

plays a role in their eating behaviors, even when they reside in different countries in order to ensure the health and well-being of the students.

There are two main research questions in this study. The first research question is "Do Malaysian students think that family plays a role in their eating behaviors or associate family with food?" The second research question is "How do families play a role in Malaysian students' eating behaviors when they were in Malaysia and when they are in the U.S.?" Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore and understand the role of family on the eating behaviors and food choices of Malaysian international students who live apart from their families in a different country.

Method

A qualitative approach is taken in this study because the purpose of qualitative research is to explore, understand, and learn about a specific situation or phenomenon (Stake, 2010). The use of qualitative methodology is the suitable for the nature of this study which is to understand the phenomenon of family role in eating and other food-related behaviors in a specific population - Malaysian students living away from home. Qualitative research acknowledges the existence of multiple realities based on personal experiences of each participant and therefore the use of methods such as interviews are common (Stake, 2010). The use of interviews in this study to collect data from participants allows for experiential understanding on the participants' thoughts regarding the role of family in their eating behaviors. Given the limited past research on Malaysian students' eating behaviors, qualitative research is also an appropriate research approach to this study.

Social constructivism is the worldview through which this study is done. According to Creswell (2007), social constructivism is a worldview in which individuals seek meaning and understanding in their living environment. Social constructivism takes into account the multiple views and perspectives of individuals and develops subjective meanings and views of experiences (Creswell, 2007). The aim of this worldview is to seek participants' views and rely on their experiences as much as possible to form complex views and multiple realities (Creswell, 2007). This study aims to understand and learn more about the role of family in Malaysian students' eating behaviors as well as seek out multiple perspectives and experiences of Malaysian students, who live away from home, on whether or how family has a part in students' food-related behaviors before and after students left their country. Therefore, the use of social constructivism as the worldview is most appropriate for this study.

Participants

A total of 5 Malaysian students studying at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) participated in this study. All the students' races were Chinese, meaning that they were of Chinese descent whose ancestors originated from China and migrated to Malaysia centuries ago. Participants were 3 females and 2 males who were 22 or 23 years of age. Two of the participants were in their sophomore year at UNL and the other 3 participants were graduate students. One of the graduate students was in her first year while the other 2 participants were in their second year of graduate school. Two participants have not been back to Malaysia for the past year whereas the other 3 participants were back in Malaysia during the recent summer vacation. All participants have been in the United States for at least one year.

Interview Protocol

An unstructured interview protocol was developed for the purpose of this study. I acknowledged my own biases and wrote down my expectations - taking caution not to have my expectations shape the interview questions and the way I interviewed participants. Participants were asked an ice-breaker question, "What comes to mind when you think about family and food?" Consequent questions were probed from the participants' answers. Questions were asked concerning participants' current daily eating patterns (Tell me more about your daily mealtimes and eating patterns), participants' eating patterns when they were in Malaysia (Could you describe how your mealtimes were like when you were in Malaysia?), participants' thoughts on the role of family in their food-related behaviors while they were in Malaysia and in the U.S. (Do you think that your family plays a role in your eating behaviors and food choices? If yes, how so? If no, why not?), and participants' thoughts on how family might or might not have shaped their current food-related behaviors (Do you think that the eating behaviors and food choices/preferences you grew up with while you were staying with you family played a role in your eating behaviors and food choices today? How so?).

Procedure

A convenience sample was used in this study; with the only criteria being participants must be international Malaysian students. All participants volunteered to be a part of this study when informed about it during a Malaysian Students' Association event. Before starting this study, IRB approval was obtained and participants were provided with consent forms prior to the interviews and were offered to be informed about the study's findings once the study has been completed. All participants consented and

agreed to be informed about the study's findings. Each participant completed a 15-20 minute interview in a secure and quiet location on the UNL city campus. These interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Participant interviews were identified by their initials.

Ethical Considerations

One ethical consideration in this study was whether the questions about family mealtimes might be deemed as prying into the participants' personal lives. Family mealtimes could be viewed as a personal aspect for some, and the fact that these students have not been home to eat with their families in awhile might make them feel homesick due to the interview questions. However, all participants answered willingly with no signs of upset or forcefulness. They were happy and willing to impart their experiences on food and family.

Analysis

The transcribed interviews were entered and kept in MAXqda, a qualitative data analysis software that assisted in the storing, retrieving, and coding processes of unstructured data. With the MAXqda program, the data were searched for sections or data blocks that were recurring and significant which accurately described the participants' thoughts and opinions on the role of family on their food-related behaviors. From these data blocks, codes were formed to encompass the information in each data block. Whenever possible, *in vivo* codes were used to give the study a stronger sense of the participants' perspectives. After all the codes were obtained, they were reviewed to see if any overlapping occurred. Redundant codes were removed or collapsed with other codes, and by the end of this process, a new set of codes were formed. These new set of

codes were then grouped together to formulate themes. Six themes were formed, with each theme encompassing several codes. Coding and analysis of the data followed an inductive approach - working from the details of participants' experiences to form bigger, broader themes.

Validity

After compiling the themes and their respective codes, the themes and codes were taken back to the participants for member checking to ensure validity. I also ensured validity from recognizing the potential influences of my own knowledge and experiences as an international Malaysian student living in the U.S. on the interpretation of these participants' experiences, otherwise known as reflexivity. As a Malaysian student, I can relate to these students experiences and it is important for me to learn whether these participants had similar experiences to me. I am also interested to learn about other aspects of being a Malaysian student in the U.S. that I have not experienced or of which am not aware. I want to understand how these similar and different food-related experiences can inform me about the healthiness of Malaysian students' eating because health is very important, especially for international students who experience the added stress of being away from home and in a foreign country. Although I am aware that my experiences would play a role in the interpretation of the participants' experiences, I am careful to ensure that I do not impose my own expectations and experiences on the participants during the interviews and that I keep an open mind throughout data coding.

Findings

Codes developed from the interviews were categorized into six themes; "family plays an important role," "family mealtimes," parental preferences and decision-making,

parental advice, "lasting habits," and culture and family history. *In vivo* codes, which were taken exactly as the participants said them, were placed in quotation marks.

"Family plays an important role"

All participants thought that family plays an important role in eating behaviors – both in their personal lives and in general. One participant, WC, described how he thought family was important because most people grew up eating with family and early eating experiences would shape their future eating behaviors.

> *"Yea, family plays an important role in a person's food choices. I mean of course because what you have now is pretty much what you've been brought up with and exposed to. It's all based on what your family is I suppose. So I mean, if you're brought up eating vegetables rather than an all-meat diet, you're just going to stick with that…When you were a kid, your parents got to feed you right. That way when you grow up, you will do the same thing on your own."*

Another participant, CS, said that "food plays a very important role in keeping a family together, spending quality time with each other." One participant, JT, talked about how food is an "acquired taste" and said that "whatever you grew up eating, you will like." She went on to explain how some foods which were deemed as weird by others were normal for some who grew up eating such foods with their families.

> *"I have never heard of peanut butter and celery in my life because they were never eaten together at home. And then I come here and people say, "Yea, I love that because I grew up eating it." I know people who eat tomatoes with sugar, not salt. So yea, your family has a lot of influence over what you eat because if*

you're introduced to it when you're young, like for me, people think Bovril is disgusting or Marmite is disgusting but for me, I grew up eating that as a kid. I distinctly remember my grandma making it for me so I grew up to like it even though some people think it's gross."

"Family mealtimes"

When it came to food and family, all participants mentioned about their family mealtimes and for all participants except one, dinner was the meal that everyone ate together. These family mealtimes shaped the participants food and eating behaviors. There were several aspects of family mealtimes which were important to the participants; "home-cooked food," "healthy and balanced meal," "dinner time," conversations and "bonding," "celebrations," and "eating out."

"Home-cooked food."

All participants associated family mealtimes with home-cooked food. For one participant, AS, her grandmother used to prepare the meals at home. However, after she got sick, AS' mother took over the cooking in the house. For all other participants, their mothers were the ones who did the cooking at home. JL mentioned that home-cooked food was "something I (she) miss which I (she) cannot really get here." WC associated home-cooked food with being "healthy."

"Healthy and balanced meal."

All participants also associated family mealtimes with being healthy and balanced. WC said that family meals provided a "better balanced diet with fish and meat and vegetables" and said that meals at home were more "balanced and healthy in

general." One participant, JL, mentioned that her parents are "very, very health conscious people" and so her meals at home were always healthy. Another participant, AS, only associated family meals as healthy and well-balanced after her mother took over the cooking at home. She said that her mother was a "big advocate of healthy eating" and therefore always prepared very healthy meals at home. JT thought of family meals as being balanced with a mix of "vegetables and meat dishes." CS mentioned that since his mother cooks, "she would make sure that there would be soup, vegetables, and protein too" to ensure that his family has a well-balanced meal.

"Dinner time."

For all except one participant, dinner was frequently eaten together as a family. Participants mentioned how breakfast and lunch were not eaten together because of different work and school schedules but dinner time was normally the time that everyone was home together. JT commented that "My mum and dad works, so not lunch, and not breakfast that we eat together, but dinner, yes" and this comment applied to everyone except for AS. For AS, she said that her family does not sit down and eat any meals together because "most of the time, our (their) schedules are different." AS mentioned how as a child, her family used to sit together for dinners but for the past 10 years, "life got more hectic…and then people were just all around , we don't sit together and have meals anymore." In talking about her typical dinners at home, AS mentioned that "the kids would just "grab our (their) bowls, get all the food, and just sit in front of the TV and watch and eat." However, her mother would wait for her father to come home from work for dinner. For JL, she said that her family would always have dinner together. She said that they would usually wait for her father to come home from work and they would sit

together at the dinner table and eat. JT, WC, and CS also all wait for everyone to get back from work and school and would sit together at the table and have dinner.

Conversations and "bonding."

Except for AS, all participants talked about how their dinners with their families were filled with conversations and how they viewed these mealtimes as a time to bond. CS viewed food as bringing family together and said that "usually when family gathers around, there is always food." He also added that he "believe(s) that mealtimes with family are important because it serves as a bonding session." CS also talked about how his family mealtimes were.

> *"We have mealtime conversations about how our days were, how the food during the meal tasted, and sometimes we talk about the news. I think it is kind of like a bonding session for us as a family."*

As for JL, she mentioned how her father uses mealtimes together as a time for him to give advice on nutrition and healthy eating habits. He also uses mealtimes to ask about how each other's days were and to give advice to the kids. Sometimes, he would bring up something that happened in the news which JL said is "usually negative news that he'll use to scare us (her and her siblings) to not play so much computer games and things like that." JL also viewed family mealtimes as bonding because "we (they) don't watch the same thing on TV, people are usually in their own rooms on their computers. So there's only dinner time that we (they) are sitting together." When asked about her family mealtimes, JT talked about how her meals with family was a chance to talk and bond.

"I guess we would just talk about what we did today and what are our plans for studies. They (parents) will talk about my studies, what my sister is up to and my mum will talk about what happened at her work. And then my mum and dad will talk about some of their friends, what they are doing, or what's going on in the news even. So things like that. I think for my family, yea mealtimes are important for bonding. Because…we seem to do our own thing throughout the day but when it's mealtimes, we have to sit down. Like my mum doesn't always ask us to sit down and eat together, but I feel like for me, I like to sit down and find out what has been going on in their day. Because in my family, ...my dad goes to work, my brother does his own thing, my sister has her own thing, and I do my own thing. But at dinner time, when we have family dinner, yea it's a time to "Yea, tell me what you're up to, what you're doing." Yea."

For WC, he said that during mealtimes, his family would "eat, talk about school, the usual small talk." When he was living in Malaysia last time, WC felt like mealtimes were more of a routine thing compared to chances to bond. However now that he lives in the U.S., WC said that he viewed family mealtimes as opportunities to bond. He said that "Now is different. If I (he) go(es) back, it'll be more like a bonding experience." For AS, even when her family have meals together during special occasions, she said that "we (they) will just finish our (their) food and then just go. We (they) don't usually talk much. Most of the time, the talking is done amongst adults."

"Celebrations."

Two participants, JL and AS, mentioned about celebrations as an aspect of family mealtimes. When asked about food and family, JL mentioned celebrations as the "first thing that comes to mind." When asked to elaborate, JL talked about how her family meals would have special dishes.

> *"Celebrations like for special occasions. The big ones would be like Chinese New Year or you know, things where your mum would usually cook more stuff. Or someone's birthday, you know your mum will cook something special."*

AS mentioned that during special occasions like her mother's birthday or during the Chinese New Year reunion dinner, her family members would get together and eat. She also mentioned her father taking her and her siblings out to Chinese restaurants to celebrate their birthdays and then have cake at home.

"Eating out."

All participants except for JL, mentioned that they would occasionally go out to eat as a family. AS mentioned that "a lot of times, during whoever's birthday, we (they) would eat out. Whenever we (they) are out to eat, we (they) would be eating together." JT described how the dishes she ate when she was eating out with her family were similar to what she would eat at home where it would be at a Chinese restaurant with "dishes and rice." WC and CS mentioned that sometimes, they would eat out with their families. On the other hand, JL said that she rarely eats out with her family as her dad does not like to eat out.

Parental preferences and decision-making

All participants mentioned how their parents' preferences or dislikes for certain foods or food categories influenced the food that they grew up eating and the food habits which they developed. While living with their families, participants also mentioned how their parents' choices and decisions about food influenced the participants' own eating habits and behaviors. There were two aspects mentioned; "mother's cooking" and food consumption.

"**Mother's cooking."**

Because all participants mentioned that their mothers cooked, they also felt that a lot of what they ate at home was dictated by the food their mothers bought and chose to cook. WC said that home-cooked food was healthier "especially when mum is involved. She'll make us eat healthier food like fish. There's always going to be fish and vegetables…and fruits." He said that his mother "pretty much dictated what we (they) eat. She doesn't really ask us (them) what we (they) want to eat on that day…most of the time, we (they) just eat whatever she cooks." JT said that even though her mother is really busy because she works, she "will still always have…a vegetable dish, a meat dish, and some other dish like tofu or whatever…So that's what we (they) eat at home…I guess when my mum cooks dinner at home, I'll just eat what she cooks." CS also mentioned that his mother would "make sure that there would be soup, vegetables, and protein too." He also mentioned that in Malaysia, his mother "does the grocery shopping and cooking so she dictates what we (they) as a family eat." AS mentioned that her grandmother used to determine what food goes on the table but once she got sick, AS' mother took over the cooking and decided on healthier food choices for the family.

"…and when she (grandmother) gradually got sicker, my mum took over and she started cooking healthier. And we had a maid and she would teach my maid to cook healthier. My mum banished oyster sauce, she would never use it. She would just use salt, soy sauce and whatever natural ingredients, that's it. There's no other sauce…my mum would never use anything except for soy sauce and salt. And a lot of times, she just cooks with salt. Which is very bland but we got used to it after, I think it's been about 8 years she's been doing that. A lot of times, she just dumps vegetables and just put salt and that's it. There's nothing. It's very bland but we got used to it."

Food consumption.

Besides the participants' mothers' cooking, there were other parental preferences that influenced the participants' food intake and eating behaviors. JL mentioned that her parents were very health conscious and that determined what food they would eat during mealtimes, especially during dinner. She also mentioned that because her father does not like to eat out, they as a family rarely get to do so.

"Because…my dad is someone who doesn't like to eat out a lot. So he would insist on eating at home, every single time that he is at home. I think we only ate out like once or twice in a month. My family eats at home very, very often. No matter how much we protest actually...I think I eat less fast food because growing up my parents discourages eating fast food and eating outside so I eat a lot less outside…compared to other people."

Another participant, JT also talked about how her parents' liking for fruits influenced the amount of fruits they buy home for her family to consume. She also mentioned how her father likes vegetables as well and would always ask her mother to cook more vegetables. JT also explained how her mother enjoys snacking once in awhile and buys snacks home. As a result, JT learned to enjoy snacking too. She also said that her brother has a sweet tooth and always had candy and she would "take some candies from him too." Whenever they eat out, JT said that her mother is "usually the more adventurous one and I (JT) will just tag along with whatever." AS also mentioned how her father is a "foodie" and used to take them out to places to try different foods or go out to places to buy food back for the family. However, she said that even though her father likes food, "he dislikes Western or fast food a lot" and would never bring AS and her siblings to fast food restaurants. AS talked about her experiences as a child and how her father would not bring her or her siblings to fast food joints to celebrate birthdays.

> "*And even when we were kids, you know how a lot of kids' parents would bring them to McDonalds to celebrate birthdays - my parents would never bring us to those places to celebrate birthdays. My dad would bring us to a Chinese restaurant which is not a kid-friendly place and order dishes like Chinese people eat. That's not a kid birthday place but that's what we have for our birthday. And then we would go home and have our cake. So our birthdays are not like other kids in like fast food restaurants."*

Parental advice

All participants mentioned that their parents were concerned about their eating habits, especially since they came to the U.S. and gave them advice on nutrition and healthy eating both when they were in Malaysia and in the U.S. All participants' parents would ask about the participants' eating habits every time they communicated via the telephone or the Internet. There were several components in this theme - nutritional knowledge, disparity in acceptance of advice, and acceptance of valid advice.

Nutritional knowledge.

For AS, most of her nutritional knowledge comes from her mother because she is a "very, very, very heavy advocate of healthy eating." AS talked about how her mother educated her on healthy foods and how that changed her food choices.

> "*I do like healthier choices instead of greasy stuff but when I grew up, I didn't know what was healthy and what was not. It's because of my mum. She made the distinction okay this is healthy. Brown rice is better than white rice. Organic and whole food, multigrain food is better. I never touch white bread only whole meal bread. So things like that."*

Another participant, JL, said that being health conscious, her parents would constantly nag at her if she does not eat breakfast or if she skipped meals. Her parents also gave her advice on unhealthy eating habits.

> "*Every single time I am home, they will nag me non-stop about nothing breakfast, not eating enough breakfast, what is a good breakfast. I always get that lecture…My parents are very against eating supper because they think it's not*

good for digestion. So they're like eat your 3 meals. They have a lot of sayings, a lot of sayings related to healthy diet."

JL's parents also use family mealtimes to give nutritional advice and information to JL and her siblings. As for another participant, JT, she also gets nutritional advice and knowledge from her mother who is a doctor. For JT, her mother's occupation influences JT to take her mother's advice more seriously.

"My mum is a doctor so that kind of influences me too. Because I think that she should know about nutrition, since she studies all these and she's had more experience than me."

Both WC and CS also mentioned getting nutritional advice from their mothers. WC said that his mother would keep asking him to eat healthy every time they communicated over the phone. She would give him advice on what to cook so he can have healthy meals. CS said that when he was in Malaysia, he frequently watched his mother cook and he would learn recipes and nutritional values of food from his mother. Even when he is in the U.S. now, CS said that his mother would send him recipes over the Internet and he would try and cook them.

Disparity in acceptance of advice.

Although the participants' parents constantly gave them advice on healthy eating, some participants followed their parents' advice when they were living with them in Malaysia but not when they came to the U.S. because their parents were no longer available to directly monitor them. WC said that although his parents kept asking him to cook healthy soups every week, he said that he hardly does so because he is too lazy to

cook and is able to get away with it because his parents aren't here. Another participant JL said that even though her parents constantly nagged her about breakfast consumption, she does not eat breakfast when living in the U.S. because her parents aren't here to nag her about it.

> *"I don't really eat breakfast here (in the U.S.) because I can get away with it. I will only drink coffee. Back there, I will drink coffee as well but because my parents nag, I will just have to follow…My parents will not let me skip meals. So they will cook for me. If I do not eat, they will nag until I eat it. Here, it's like no one really take care of me. No one really nag me or do anything so I can get away with it. I can skip my breakfast, I can skip my lunch and I will just eat dinner and eat supper and get over with."*

However, JL also mentioned that when she gets sick, she will adhere to her parents' advice on healthy eating. She said that when she feels unwell, she would remember her parents' advice and consume three meals a day and eat a good amount of vegetables. Another participant, CS, said that since he came to the U.S., he had to get his own groceries, which allows him to purchase whatever food that he wants.

> *"Since I came here, I'm all by myself. I go to the grocery store and just get whatever I want and there is no one looking after me. Since I have the freedom to get whatever and eat whatever I want, that kind of changed some of the food that I eat. I eat more meat compared to vegetables and I buy more junk food so my junk food consumption slightly increased."*

Acceptance of valid advice.

For the two participants, JT and AS, who did not mention any disparity in accepting their parents' healthy eating advice; they mentioned that they would make sure their parents' advice was valid before accepting them. Although in general, JT and AS listened to and followed their parents' healthy eating advice, they did their own research on food and nutrition as well to make sure that the advice is valid. JT talked about how she would do her own research about food by reading books and looking for information on the Internet.

> *"So yea, I think I would listen to her (mother) when she says something, if it's valid. But then yea, I would also go find out myself. Like go online or read books about what is this new food, what it's about and yea, find out for myself."*

AS also talked about how in general, she adhered to her mother's advice on healthy eating but she did not follow her mother's advice when her mother told her not to become a vegetarian due to the fear of not getting enough nutrients from not consuming meat.

> *"Because before you take an advice, you have to know whether it's good advice. So for example, when my mum told me to start eating meat when I didn't want to, I didn't take her advice because I just think that I want to do it my way. So it's whether I think it's good advice. If it's good I'll just follow."*

"Lasting habits"

All participants also talked about how certain food habits, preferences, or choices stayed with them from young until the present. These lasting food behaviors were categorized in terms of "mealtimes," "to do or not," and "must-have."

“Mealtimes.”

Three of the participants mentioned that some factors of their mealtimes remained the same after coming to the U.S. During the winter months in the U.S., JT and AS said that their dinner times would get “thrown off schedule” because it got darker earlier and they were used to eating dinner when the sky gets dark. Both JT and AS grew up eating dinner when the sky gets dark and they tend to do the same in the U.S. Participants also mentioned the number of meals that they consumed were the same when they were in Malaysia and now, when they are in the U.S. JT said that she usually does not consume breakfast in Malaysia and still does not do so in the U.S. AS mentioned that she usually skipped breakfast and had lunch and dinner when she was in Malaysia and that stayed the same for her in the U.S. Another participant, CS, mentioned that he grew up hardly skipping breakfast and eating three meals a day in Malaysia and continues to do so in the U.S.

“To do or not.”

All participants mentioned certain eating behaviors that their families instilled in them which stuck on until today. WC mentioned that when he was young, he used to be a messy eater and did not like eating fish and vegetables. His parents nagged him about his behaviors and he started to eat fish and vegetables and became a less messy eater. For JL, growing up, her parents always advised her not to waste food and for her, that advice “definitely carried over. I (she) will feel very guilty if I (she) waste(s) food even though the dorm food tastes very bad.” This was the same for JT as she said that growing up, her family talked about finishing food on her plate and she would do that. JT said that she

doesn't like wasting food "because it's food. If it's on your plate, then you should eat it." Another participant, CS, was also brought up by his family to finish everything on his plate which he practices until today. He also said that growing up, his mother did not allow him to eat a lot of sweets and candies so he does not consume a lot of sweet foods now. For AS, as a child, she used to be forced to finish big portions of food on her plate by her grandmother and she exclaimed that now, she "hate(s) to be forced to eat food." Growing up with her mother as a healthy eating advocate, AS also continues to practice healthy eating habits like "no fried food, go for white meat instead of red meat, go for lean meat instead of fatty."

"Must-have."

Two participants also mentioned certain foods or food groups that they must consume every day because the habits were instilled in them by their families since young. WC mentioned that he has to have fruits every day, "especially oranges" and he "feels uncomfortable not having fruits." Another participant, JT, mentioned that she has to eat vegetables and meat with every meal and fruits every day.

> *"So I'm used to having veggies (vegetables) and meat with my meal. I don't feel comfortable if I just have meat or it doesn't seem balanced to me if the veggies are not there…I grew up thinking that yea, fruits and veggies are good. Even now I think that and I feel like I need to have fruit and veggies. It's become part of what I eat everyday. I don't feel comfortable if I go a few days without eating fruits or veggies…I feel that some of the habits that I gained from them (family) like eating*

veggies at every meal, I want to do that. And then fruits I would buy them. I like having fruits in my home."

Culture and family history

The culture within the participants' families as well as the participants' family histories plays an important role in their eating behaviors as well. Coming from a frugal Chinese background, JL had parents who believed in eating three moderate meals a day without over-eating or over-indulging. JL said that if her mother was to cook a little more or an extra dish, her father would question as to why there was so much food on the table. JL also said that her father used to say a Chinese saying about eating just enough to feel full and happy and this influenced JL to consume meals in smaller portions. JL also mentioned that since she grew up in an Asian family and country, she prefers Asian food compared to any other types of food. Another participant, CS, also mentioned that growing up in an Asian family in a tropical country, his mother would always encourage him not to eat too much fried foods as they were "heaty for the body" and to drink a lot of water. For AS, even though she grew up in a Chinese family as well, her family did not practice the habit of 'eating just enough' but instead encourages eating in abundance. AS' paternal side of the family believed that "having a lot of rice in the kitchen" or having an abundance to eat equals to being prosperous. As a result of this Chinese belief, AS has family members who had a string of health problems, which resulted in AS' adherence to the healthy eating habits that her maternal family practices.

"My grandparents died because they chose the wrong food. Because they chose the wrong food, they had diabetes, they had high cholesterol. Same goes with my

grandfather. He used to have 3 rounds of breakfast, lunch, tea time and then dinner. He probably has 2 dinners. So he enjoys eating a lot but that was what killed him. Same goes to my grandmother…High cholesterol…killed her as well. I think a lot of times, what killed both of them were they didn't know much about nutrition…My mum's side of the family is very healthy. None of her brothers or sisters has any sickness in that kind…they don't eat unhealthy food at all. And they eat in very moderate portion. My dad's side of the family, they eat in huge portions because in Chinese belief, if you have a lot to eat, you are prosperous…And if you don't have enough to eat, people would say why don't you feed your kids enough. It's a very common perception."

However, AS mentioned that recently her father suffered a stroke due to his "China man" eating habits of eating foods like "fatty pork" and this has encouraged her father to start changing his eating habits. AS also mentioned how her grandmother used to cook for her family before she got sick and how those foods were unhealthy. However due to the Chinese customary belief in her family, her mother could not directly take over the job of cooking for the family. Instead, she assisted AS' grandmother in her cooking and gave subtle hints for healthier cooking.

"…I think my mum could not just take over the title of the chef at home because in that kind of Asian culture, being a woman and being able to take charge of the kitchen is very important role in the family. So it's like an honorary title thing that you can't just take away that chef title from your mother-in-law. So my mum just let it be. But a lot of times she would tell my grandma, oh maybe you can put less salt."

In this way, family culture influenced the food that AS consumed during the earlier years of life when her grandmother was still cooking for the family. However, after her grandmother got too sick to cook, AS' mother took over the cooking and AS started to consume healthier foods and has been doing so since then.

Discussion

This study explored the familial themes in Malaysian international students' eating behaviors in order to understand the role of family in their eating behaviors when they were in Malaysia and now when they are living in the U.S. The six themes in this study – "family plays an important role," "family mealtimes," parental preferences and decision-making, parental advice, "lasting habits," and culture and family history reflected the participants' thoughts on how family played a role in their eating behaviors both in Malaysia and in the U.S. The first theme "family plays an important role" revealed that all participants viewed family as an important socializing agent that influences their eating behaviors because for them, family defines the food that one is used to eating while growing up. This was consistent with previous literature in the importance of family upbringing in order to instill healthy eating habits in individuals (Branen & Fletcher, 1999; Deshpande et al., 2009).

The second theme, "family mealtimes" described the meanings that participants gave towards meals with their families. Dinner was the meal most often eaten together as a family because it was the time that everyone was home from work and school. This was consistent with past literature which showed that dinner was the meal that family members most frequently shared (Ackard & Neumark-Sztainer, 2001). All participants,

including the participant who did not have dinner with her family, thought that meals with family provided an excellent opportunity to bond. I found it interesting that one participant, AS, still regarded family mealtimes as opportunities for conversation and bonding even though she did not usually have dinner with family and even when she did, the children or younger generation in the family were not including in mealtime conversations because "only the adults did the talking." This could reflect that despite family practices, Malaysian students might view mealtimes in general as a time to talk and bond with others as it is common practice in Malaysian culture to associate socialization with food. The association of "celebrations" with family meals also reflects the socialization aspect of food in the Malaysian culture. In addition, the conversation and bonding during family meals could in turn encourage healthier eating behaviors as close family bonds and family cohesion lead to healthier food consumption and eating habits (Franko et al., 2008).

The third theme, parental preferences and decision-making reflected the dependence of Malaysian students on their parents, especially mothers, for their daily meals when they were living together with their family in Malaysia. Malaysian students did not mention displaying strong food requests and usually ate whatever their parents cooked or preferred. This could reflect some of the collectivistic Malaysian culture whereby individuals prefer to get along to maintain harmony instead of voicing strong opinions over what to eat – something not worth disrupting harmony over. The maintenance of healthy eating behaviors in some Malaysian students in the U.S. also reflects how a lack of independence in food choices in Malaysia may not be entirely detrimental for their eating behaviors – similar to how enmeshment did not predict

pathological eating in culturally independent individuals (Tomiyama & Mann, 2008). These direct parental influences on Malaysian students' food consumption at home which affect their later eating behaviors in the U.S. also supports Rozin et al.'s (1984) notion that childhood socializing or parental modeling occurs at home when it comes to food and eating habits.

Another direct parental influence on Malaysian students' eating behaviors is parental advice which was the fourth theme in this study. Malaysian students reported receiving parental advice, with nutritional knowledge being one of the main forms of advice. This was consistent with Hertzler and Frary (1995) who found family to be one of the largest nutritional knowledge networks. Although students currently gain food-related advice from their parents, they do not always adhere to such advice – especially when they are in the U.S., away from the direct monitoring of parents. The few students who did not always adhere to the healthy eating advice from their parents reported that it is usually due to the lack of time, incapacity, or refusal to cook. As a student, I do see how lack of time can affect Malaysian students to eat fast, unhealthy food as opposed to healthy, home-cooked meals. Having lived in the dormitory before, I can also understand how the two students who are living in the dormitories lack the space and supplies to cook healthy food which are more suited to their Asian tastes. I found it interesting that two students spoke of accepting parental advice only if it is valid and that these two students were also the same students who reported the most adherence to healthy eating habits from home. It could be that because of their outsourcing for more nutritional information, they learn more about food and nutrition and are more likely to follow healthy eating advice from their parents.

Another theme in this study, “lasting habits,” reflected certain food and eating behaviors which Malaysian students continue practicing after they have left Malaysia to study in the U.S. All of them had certain foods that were a necessity for daily consumption or eating habits (like finishing food on one’s plate) which they grew up with and continued to engage in those behaviors until now. This was consistent with research from Branen and Fletcher (1999) and Deshpande et al. (2009) who found that food habits and behaviors are formed during childhood and that these behaviors are carried into adolescence and adulthood.

The last theme, culture and family history, showed that despite being from the same Chinese Malaysian culture, participants had different cultures within their families which influenced their eating habits and behaviors. Families who embraced different aspects of the Chinese culture (frugality in food consumption vs. food as a symbol for prosperity and abundance) engaged in different eating patterns at home, thus influencing Malaysian students’ later eating behaviors. Family illness and health-related issues as well as family history of healthy eating practices also influenced Malaysian students’ eating behaviors. The prevalence of heart diseases in one participant’s family made her realize that she wants to practice healthy eating habits. Families who had been health conscious for generations also increased students’ nutritional knowledge and shaped their healthy eating behaviors.

As with research concerning self-reports and information directly from the participants, this study has limitations in terms of the accuracy of some if their experiences due to memory lapse since they have not been back home for awhile (at least a year) to have meals with their families in Malaysia. There is also the concern about the

potential lack of accuracy or withholding of information from their childhood eating experience – again due to memory. Besides that, all participants in this study were Chinese Malaysians. Due to the vast majority of Malaysians at UNL being Chinese instead of Malay or Indian, these findings might not necessarily be true for Malaysian students of a different race like the Malays or Indians.

The findings from this study have several implications specifically for Malaysian students and broadly for other international and out-of-state students. As this study showed, parents played a role in students' (specifically Malaysian students') food choices and eating behaviors. Therefore, these findings have useful implications for college students staying away from home and their families because college is a busy and stressful time in a students' life and parents need to consistently check-in on students to ensure that they are doing the best they can in their busy schedule to eat healthy. These findings also show that it is important for students to reflect on their eating behaviors and adhere to parental advice on healthy eating habits when living away from home forces them to be responsible for their own meals. It is also important for parents to cultivate good eating habits in students while students were still living at home. Finally, these findings also have important implications for universities and colleges. The International Affairs or other similar departments in charge of arrangements concerning international students as well as student organizations could arrange for students (especially new international students) to have "host families" who could provide additional resources as well as care on students' food-related behaviors. Being away from home, having "host families" to gather and have meals with once in awhile might encourage healthier eating in Malaysian and other international students. "Host families" can also help students

adapt to and choose healthy American food as well as give them advice on staying healthy in a new environment and serve as a social support system for students.

Taking the findings from this study, future research on the role of family in Malaysian students' eating behaviors should be conducted with Malay and Indian Malaysians in order to fully understand the experiences of all three Malaysian races. Research on the eating behaviors of other international students as well as out-of-state students should also be conducted to determine the similarities and differences between other students and Malaysian students eating behaviors and food-related experiences in the U.S.

As the number of international Malaysian students increase in American colleges and universities, it is important to understand the role of family on their eating behaviors to ensure their health and well-being in the U.S. These students' experiences can also provide guidance for families and colleges to further understand the importance of families in Malaysian students' eating behaviors so that students can stay healthy in the U.S. For the Malaysian students, it is important for them to adhere to their parents' healthy eating advice so that they can eat right to stay healthy and to excel in their studies. For families, they need to lay down strong food-related foundations and keep students in check on their eating and overall well-being to ensure that families can be proud of their children future success in graduating college. For departments and student organizations within colleges and universities, they should provide additional "family-oriented" resources for all international students like "host families" to guide them into eating well and staying healthy in a new environment to ensure higher graduation rates which would make the schools proud.

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