PERCEPTIONS OF THE HOST COUNTRY’S FOOD CULTURE AMONG FEMALE IMMIGRANTS FROM AFRICA AND ASIA: ASPECTS RELEVANT FOR CULTURE SENSITIVITY IN NUTRITION COMMUNICATION

INTRODUCTION

Migration to a Western country is often associated with the adoption of less healthy dietary habits, higher risk of obesity and related disorders.\textsuperscript{1,2} Changes in dietary composition, described as the nutrition transition, happen worldwide driven by a range of factors, including urbanization, economic growth and new technology.\textsuperscript{3} Migration can be a situation where the nutrition transition happens very quickly. The process whereby immigrants adopt the host country’s dietary practices is called dietary acculturation.\textsuperscript{4}

The development of increasingly multicultural societies creates new challenges for health promotion initiatives. Most health promotion activities include some elements of information, education and communication. A review paper on theory and health promotion strategies used among immigrant women emphasizes that health promotion programs should be tailored to be consistent with immigrants’ characteristics, needs and cultural beliefs.\textsuperscript{5} There is a growing recognition that effective health communication must be culturally sensitive.\textsuperscript{6} Attributes of cultural sensitivity have been described as knowledge, consideration, understanding, respect, and tailoring.\textsuperscript{7} Intercultural communication involves more than language issues,\textsuperscript{8} and particularly differences in cultural values have been identified as
important predictors of culture-related communication difficulties.\textsuperscript{9} Culture shapes perceptions and practices relevant to health and may mediate responses to health education.\textsuperscript{10}

Furthermore, efforts to promote healthy diets must focus on more than simply education about the relationship between diet and health.\textsuperscript{11} Preliminary evidence from systematic reviews indicates that socio-cultural environmental factors, defining what is socially acceptable, desirable and appropriate to eat, might be more important in shaping dietary behavior than the physical environments that define the availability and accessibility of foods.\textsuperscript{12} Food is central to individual identity,\textsuperscript{13,14} and cultures are highly selective in what they define as food.\textsuperscript{15} No food is appropriate for everyone, at all times, in all circumstances and quantities.\textsuperscript{13} Several authors argue that dietary changes are more likely to be acceptable if nutrition communication and interventions are offered within a culturally sensitive context.\textsuperscript{16-18}

This research had three aims: to explore how female immigrants from Africa and Asia perceived the host country’s food culture in relation to their original food culture, to identify aspects of their original food culture which they considered important to preserve after immigration, and to describe how they pursued to preserve them. The findings were discussed in relation to attributes of cultural sensitivity relevant for nutrition communication.
METHODS

Participants

Researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 21 female immigrants from 11 African and Asian countries living in Oslo, Norway. This study was carried out among women only, because they often are responsible for food preparation and because health promotion activities aimed at families tend to target women. Study participants, aged 25 to 60 years, varied in terms of country of origin, years of residence, and employment and marital status. The term “immigrant” was used to denote women born to two foreign-born parents and who had moved to Norway. Ethnicity was defined as self-reported country of birth. To investigate the study’s aim, participants from many countries were included, with priority given to the largest African and Asian immigrant groups in Norway.

Participants resided in areas of Oslo with a population having a predominantly low to middle socioeconomic status and a high proportion of immigrants. Table 1 shows some characteristics of the participants. The majority was either in (part-time) employment, conducting an internship related to language training or in education. Most of the participants had children and were married. Reasons for migration and years of residence in Norway varied (2 to 35 years). Approximately half the participants had lived in Norway for less than ten years. Many had arrived after their husbands. Although information on socioeconomic status was not collected,
participants were considered to be typical of the immigrant population in Oslo based on place of residence and employment status.\textsuperscript{19}

(Table 1 approximately here)

\section*{Data Collection}

The data collection had elements of a phenomenological approach, which aims to explore the subjective lived experience of individuals and to understand individual perceptions.\textsuperscript{20} In-depth interviews were used to encourage participants to reflect on a phenomenon based on their everyday experiences. A convenience sampling strategy was followed for the early recruitment stages. Later on, the characteristics of already included participants guided further recruitment throughout the study enrollment. To ensure a high variation in experiences reported, purposive sampling was applied to include women from the largest African and Asian immigrant groups and to achieve variation in years of residence, and occupational and marital status. The participants were recruited through women’s centers run by non-governmental organizations or at kindergartens. Recruitment continued until the interviews achieved replication of response. The researchers identified predominant themes in the first 12 interviews, and subsequent interviews focused on these themes. The language used during the interviews was Norwegian. Participants’ oral Norwegian language skills ranged from low to high fluency. If language difficulties arose, questions were rephrased or translated into English. The researchers decided not to use an interpreter, because this could cause methodological challenges when collecting and interpreting qualitative data.\textsuperscript{21}
The interviews (lasting from 30 to 53 minutes) were conducted between June 2010 and February 2011, and followed a semi-structured interview guide. The interview guide was pilot tested prior to the study and was adjusted and further developed throughout the data collection. The participants were told that the study aimed to explore their experiences of food from two cultures. The themes in the interview script relevant for this article were: 1) Description of current food habits, shopping routines and everyday meal preparation; 2) Description of food habits, shopping routines and everyday meal preparation prior to migration; 3) Perceptions of Norwegian food and their memories of their first encounter with it; 4) Similarities and dissimilarities between their original food culture and Norway’s; 5) Food items, meals and food habits which were important to preserve. The researchers asked participants directly about what they considered as typical Norwegian food, or their ideas on this subject emerged gradually during their narratives. The participants were not specifically asked about healthy food, but when they introduced this issue, the researchers asked follow-up questions. Two researchers, a sociologist, experienced in qualitative research and a public health nutritionist, were involved in the data collection and analysis. The interview guide reflected their different educational backgrounds and strengthened the data interpretation. Both researchers are themselves immigrants from European countries. The Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD) approved the study, and participants gave their informed consent.

Analysis
Data collection and analysis proceeded in parallel. The interviews were tape-recorded. One of the two researchers involved in the data collection and analysis transcribed the interviews. The second researcher carefully read the transcripts to ensure their accuracy. The majority of the analysis was conducted in schemes in digital text documents. A qualitative software program, Atlas.ti (version 6.2.15, ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH, Berlin, Germany, 2011) was used to manage some of the data.

The analytical procedure was guided by principles of a phenomenological method. Analysis started by reading each participant’s interview to get an overall impression and preliminary understanding of the phenomenon of interest and its contexts. Then meaning units were identified and interrogated in terms of the article’s aims. The coding of meaning units reflected researchers’ interpretations of participants’ statements. Thereafter, the researchers searched for underlying or covert meanings and organized codes into categories. The main categories were participants’ perceptions and acceptance of the host country’s food culture, experienced differences between the food cultures, current food habits, predisposing factors related to food choice, and how participants manage the encounter of divergent food cultures. The relationships between the emerging categories were repeatedly examined. Some categories were redefined as data from new interviews were gathered. Identified categories were discussed with the participants’ peer groups at the recruitment sites as a form of member check to improve credibility.
RESULTS

Participants’ Perceptions of the Host Country’s Food Culture in Relation to Their Original Food Culture

The interviews revealed that participants clearly compared their original food culture with the host country’s and distinguished between them. When talking about their original food culture, participants used terms like “our food” or “we eat,” whereas they used “their food” or “they eat” when talking about the Norwegian food culture. Participants highlighted evident differences between the two: “My dear, there’s a huge difference. African food, or Somali food, is completely different from Norwegian food” (Somalia 3). Participants from African and Asian countries reported several analogous examples when comparing their original food culture and the host country’s. Mainly, they reported these differences as relating to taste, food preparation methods and efforts, and organization of the daily meals.

Participants perceived the food of the host country as “tasteless and boring,” which often was related to the absence of spices. In fact, when asked about the main differences between their original and host country’s food cultures, many participants referred to the use of spices as a crucial aspect. They also attributed the lack of taste to different food preparation methods, as the following statement illustrates: “I don’t like Norwegian food. Just water. Boring food, all together, because of the spices, and it’s not fried, just boiled” (Somalia 4).
Another characteristic association regarding the host country’s food culture was that participants perceived it as “simple” and “time-saving” compared to their original food culture, as the following statement illustrates: “We don’t have time when we work. To prepare our [Somali] food takes time... That is why I prepare Norwegian food, because it does not take much time... It is difficult to organize your time around meal times and other routines” (Somalia 1). Thus, using Norwegian dishes could make it possible for the participants to serve a warm meal on busy days. Before migrating, many participants did not work outside the home. Often other relatives helped them to prepare meals and to perform other household tasks. Therefore, they had more time to prepare food. Now, they complained about lack of time and help. Participants still found it very important to prepare meals from scratch, and several reported struggling to both work outside the home and prepare meals from scratch. Although many participants stated that it takes less time to prepare Norwegian dishes and seemed interested in learning how to prepare them, a possible lack of necessary skills was observed.

Some participants described the host country’s food culture as “healthy” and sometimes even “healthier” than their original food because it was less “heavy”, containing less oil and sugar. On the other hand, some participants described the food of the host country as being poor in nutrients. For example, they felt that boiling vegetables made them less nutritious and watery. Instead, they preferred to fry vegetables to maintain their nutritional value and crispness.

The analysis of the interviews indicated that participants considered Norwegian food as not very filling or proper meals. For instance, when asked about what she ate for
breakfast, a Lebanese woman replied, “I did not have breakfast this morning. I just ate some slices of bread with spreads” (Lebanon 1). She defined breakfast as a warm meal that she now only ate at weekends when she had sufficient time to prepare it. Participants also said that their husbands did not feel full after eating Norwegian food: “If you like Somali food, Norwegian or other food isn’t that good. So he [Somali ex-husband] felt that he didn’t feel full by Norwegian food” (Somali 3).

When exploring the participant’s perceptions of Norwegian food it emerged that they tended to have an unclear picture of what dishes were typical Norwegian. When asked about the host country’s food culture, participants often mentioned food items that could be classified as globalized and westernized cuisine, in addition to some more traditional Norwegian dishes. Thus, pizza, spaghetti, and chicken nuggets, on one hand, and poached fish, boiled potatoes and meatballs on the other, became part of a wide definition of the host country’s food culture. Participants seemed to characterize any food items deviating from their original food culture as part of the host country’s food culture, as a Pakistani woman’s statement illustrates: “Pizza was Norwegian for us, because I hadn’t tasted it before I came to Norway” (Pakistani, 3).

Another recurrent theme was adherence to religious dietary rules. Many participants, particularly Muslims and Hindus, followed religious dietary rules. Muslims frequently mentioned the importance of eating halal food or of avoiding pork. Some participants expressed uncertainty about whether the food available to them was properly halal. For instance, they wondered if it contained remnants of meat (like gelatin), or whether halal labels could be trusted. Thus, some participants were confused about what was “safe” for them to eat.
Food Habits: Between Continuity and Change

Most participants emphasized that continuity with their original food culture was of utmost importance. Participants explained that they maintained, to varying degrees, certain values and practices of their original food culture. No participants stated that they had completely adopted the host country’s food culture.

Based on the participants’ narratives, three possible patterns of dietary acculturation were conceptualized: Strict continuity, flexible continuity and limited continuity of the original food culture. The first pattern, strict continuity, pertained when participants preserved their original food culture at every eating event, irrespective of time of day, day of week or special occasions, as the following statement exemplifies: “I do not eat Norwegian food. I always eat Egyptian food” (Egyptian 1).

Participants following flexible continuity, the second pattern, adhered less strictly to their original food culture while simultaneously adopting some of the host country’s food culture, for instance: “It varies. We can also prepare Norwegian food. If I prepare Pakistani food for several days, then it’s time to vary” (Pakistani 3). Such participants seemed to maintain their original food culture particularly for dinner. Breakfast and lunch, on the other hand, often contained elements typically associated with Norwegian food culture, especially sandwiches with spreads for both of these meals. Some participants even described combining their original food culture and the host country’s food culture in the same meal: They served meatballs with rice instead of potatoes, which would be typical for the Norwegian food culture.
The third pattern, limited continuity, implied adoption of the host country’s food culture and maintenance of their original only for special meals served for special occasions. In this context, participants continued with their original food culture at religious festivals and social gatherings, as the following illustrates: “At Ramadan, only, we prepare our food from our home country” (Iraqi 1).

This study did not analyze in-depth the factors influencing variations in the degree of continuity or change. However, some aspects relevant for further research can be mentioned, such as the influence of family members’ preferences on the degree of continuity with the original food culture. Many participants reported that their husbands refused to eat dishes associated with the host country’s food culture, although children often preferred such food. They gave examples of how they felt they had to cook different meals for the men and the children. Increased time of residence did not necessarily enhance the adoption of the host country’s food culture. Some participants who had lived in Norway several years stated that their food habits were now more in line with their original food habits than in the first years after migration, mainly due to increased availability of ethnic food items.

How Participants Pursued Continuity of Their Original Food Culture

Participants had found strategies to preserve important aspects of their original food culture. Findings indicated that participants searched in the new food culture for foods similar to those in their original food culture, for instance, by using food items comparable to ones familiar to them: “I like rice pudding. It is similar to our kiribat” (Sri
Lankan 1). When asked about shopping routines, many participants reported going to ethnic food stores to buy foods from their country of origin. As already mentioned, increased availability of ethnic food stores enabled continuity of their original food culture. For example, when a woman was asked what kind of food items she missed the most from her country of origin, she answered: “Oh, nothing. I prepare everything here as well” (Iraqi 2).

Despite the increased availability of ethnic food, concern about whether food was halal was a recurrent theme for several participants. One strategy mentioned to cope with this concern was to use only foods that were not affected by religious rules. Some participants cited this coping strategy to explain why they, for instance, ate more jam, sweet bread-spreads and fish, because these foods are always halal.

Some participants mentioned adopting elements from the host country’s food culture, but modifying it in their own way. Many participants had increased their consumption of fish, particularly salmon, after migration. They reported eating fish several times a week. However, to achieve cultural appropriateness of their meals, participants said that they prepared fish and fish products “in their own way.” This often implied adding spices and, for instance, frying it instead of “the Norwegian way of just poaching.” For example, a Pakistani woman said that she had to “cheat a bit” when she prepared fish cakes or salmon, which implied that she added Pakistani spices. This practice illustrates a very common way to pursue continuity: Participants transformed novel ingredients or unknown dishes into culturally appropriate meals by using spices or familiar preparation methods.
DISCUSSION

The present study highlighted that immigrants try to preserve their original food habits. Strict, flexible and limited continuity with the original food culture were observed. Participants' perceptions of the host country's food culture and their narratives about present food habits revealed aspects of culturally appropriate meals.

In discussing the results, the limitations of this study must be considered. As with other qualitative studies, the gathering of data and the interpretation of results are somewhat shaped by the researchers' orientations and experiences. Results of this study cannot be generalized. During the research process, the researchers sought to include participants whose length of residency varied. Participants had good reminiscence of their original food culture and of their food habits prior to migration. Many participants with long residency reported frequent visits to their country of birth. All participants had basic knowledge skills of the Norwegian language; however, in some interviews the participants struggled to express themselves. Although during in-depth interviews the interviewer could clear up confusion by rewording questions, language difficulties might nevertheless have influenced some of the participants' responses. One of the strengths of qualitative research designs is that it can lead to important insights into how cultural factors are associated with food habits as well as into the importance of ethnic identity in the food choice process. Indeed, this strength is supported by other studies.23-25
Previous research has been conducted on dietary acculturation and dietary changes of several immigrant populations in different countries.\(^1,^2\) In Norway, such prior research focused on the Pakistani immigrant population. Our study is unique in sampling a group with a heterogeneous ethnic background and investigating similarities regarding their encounter with a divergent food culture.

**Continuity of Cultural Identity through Culturally Appropriate Meals**

The results of this study demonstrated how participants, to varying degrees and in different ways, preserved continuity of their original food culture after migration. Participants’ accounts confirm findings from previous studies which highlight that food is an important marker for identity, ethnicity and cultural belonging among immigrants.\(^2^7^-^3^1\) When describing the process of dietary acculturation, Satia-Abouta states that immigrants either maintain their original eating patterns, develop bicultural eating patterns, or completely adopt eating patterns of the host country.\(^4\) Koctürk argues, on the other hand, that it is impossible to strictly adhere to old food habits in a foreign environment.\(^3^2\) None of the participants in our study reported to have fully adopted food habits of the host country. A study involving South Asians settled in Oslo had similar findings: Most participants reported a bicultural food pattern with heavy reliance on dishes from their original food culture.\(^3^3\) Our study indicated that some meals, like dinner on weekends or at religious celebrations, are more culturally loaded than others, which is in accordance with previous research.\(^3^3,^3^4\)

Our results were also in line with studies that describe dietary acculturation as being a dynamic process whereby people do not necessarily move linearly from one end of
the acculturation continuum to the other.\textsuperscript{4} Perceptions of the host country’s food

culture, availability of ethnic food items, religious dietary rules and family members’

preferences may possible have more influence on the degree of continuity of the

original food culture than years of residence in the new country. Many study

participants mentioned the increase in availability of foods from their country of origin.

According to a study conducted in London, the growing Ghanaian community led to

more confidence and pride in the black cultural heritage, which in turn led to

Ghanaian food’s becoming more available.\textsuperscript{29}

In our study, taste, food preparation effort and method, as well as religious dietary

rules were identified as important aspects of a culturally appropriate meal. Participants often considered meals associated with the host food culture as not

filling or proper meals. These findings are similar to previous findings among Hmong

migrants who perceived American food as not filling.\textsuperscript{35} In another study, Hmong

immigrants considered American foods served without rice as snacks, which

potentially doubled the amount of food they consumed.\textsuperscript{36}

The participants emphasized (strong) taste as being an essential aspect to preserve

from the original food culture. They used spices to transform unfamiliar ingredients

into culturally appropriate meals. Evidence for cultural appropriation through spices

exists in previous studies among immigrants in Sweden\textsuperscript{28} and Norway.\textsuperscript{37} Taste has

also been discussed by others as an important factor influencing immigrant’s food

choices.\textsuperscript{37,38}
The importance of spices as markers of food culture contradicts Koctürk’s model regarding the process of adapting to a new dietary pattern. She argues that immigrants’ use of accessory foods, like fats, herbs and spices, sweets, nuts, fruits and drinks, changes quite easily after immigration. Moreover, Koctürk states that composing a culture-specific dish is impossible without the appropriate staple, which is, in her view, most resistant to change. Our findings were more in accordance with those of Rozin and Rozin. They argue that cuisines can be described by certain typical combinations of smells and tastes, and introduce the concept of flavor principles. The attachment to these traditional flavorings, they argue, may be stronger than the attachment to the traditional staple foods. Flavors make a dish recognizable and therefore acceptable even if some ingredients are alien to the consumer. Guerrero states that “tradition is tasteful” and that distinct tastes are one of the strongest characteristics of traditional food products.

Furthermore, our study emphasized preparation effort and method as markers of a proper meal. Goode states that the mode of food preparation rather than the food items differentiates cuisines. Given that Western food often is associated with “fast food,” the concepts of time and preparation effort may differentiate the original food culture from that of the host country’s. According to Ritzer, the efficiency of a fast food meal fits with the demands of the modern, dual-career family. For most of the study participants, immigration to a Western country implied taking on work outside the home while still being the person mainly responsible for food preparation. Less time available to prepare a family meal may be associated with a feeling of loss in the new situation. Role expectations for women have changed over time; indeed, limited
time available for food preparation may be a challenge also for women of the host country.\textsuperscript{43}

**Possible Nutritional Outcomes of Dietary Acculturation**

Exposure to the host country’s food culture is a complex and dynamic process influenced by socioeconomic, demographic and cultural factors.\textsuperscript{32} A systematic review on the changing dietary habits of ethnic groups in Europe found that most ethnic groups alter their eating habits, combining parts of their original diet with some of the less healthy elements of a Western diet.\textsuperscript{1} In many cases, migration involves westernization and urbanization. The nutrition transition associated with these phenomena, emerging in low-income as well as in high-income societies, changes the diet towards more processed foods, with more fat and added sugar. Part of this transition is thought to be due to increasing purchasing power.\textsuperscript{3} Surprisingly, none of the participants in our study mentioned price as influencing their food choices in a new country.

Although there has been more focus on unhealthful dietary changes after migration, our study revealed that acculturation-associated dietary changes may also lead to some healthy adoptions. For example, many participants reported a higher consumption of fish. Participants who improved the palatability of an unfamiliar type of fish with familiar spices may exemplify a healthy encounter between two food cultures.
In this study, participants emphasized that they try to pursue their original food culture. However, several studies report that immigrants tend to make significant changes in the relative amounts of different ingredients in a dish and in the types of food items consumed in a new food environment.\textsuperscript{29,33,34} Thus, cultural continuity of food habits may still be compatible with changes in the nutritional content of the diet.\textsuperscript{44} To the extent that the traditional meals are already healthy, resistance to change may also be an advantage.\textsuperscript{45}

**Cultural Sensitivity in Nutrition Communication**

An important finding of this study is that immigrants valued preserving aspects of their original food habits. Therefore, nutrition communication may be more effective if it takes into account aspects of cultural sensitivity. Based on a concept analysis study, Foronda defined cultural sensitivity as follows: “Cultural sensitivity is employing one’s knowledge, consideration, understanding, respect, and tailoring after realizing awareness of self and others and encountering a diverse group or individual.”\textsuperscript{7} Although the five attributes of cultural sensitivity identified have distinct meanings, they cannot be considered independently. For dietitians and other health care professionals, knowledge about, understanding of and respect for a person’s cultural values and food practices may be core components in culturally sensitive nutrition communication.

According to a review of the literature, health promotion communication is more efficacious when messages are tailored.\textsuperscript{5} In a previous Norwegian study, Pakistani immigrants experienced that nutritional advice from doctors and nutritionists was
diffuse and not in accordance with their original food culture, values and meal habits.\textsuperscript{46} While this study indicates a lack of tailoring to individual food habits, our findings also point to the possibility that nutrition-related advice based on the host country's food culture may suggest food perceived as tasteless, boring and insufficiently filling.

Our findings indicated that cultural sensitivity in nutrition communication may imply that dietitians and other health care professionals must take into account a wide range of factors related to individual identity, background, religious beliefs and context. Resnicow distinguishes two structural levels of cultural sensitivity: Surface structure involves matching materials and messages to the target population. Deep structure involves incorporating cultural, social and historical influences. Whereas surface structure generally increases receptivity or acceptance of messages, deep structure conveys salience.\textsuperscript{18}

Strategies mentioned by our study participants to enhance cultural palatability of meals, like making unfamiliar food more familiar through spices or combinations of food items from both cultures, may also be useful aspects for nutrition communication. Focusing on substituting ingredients and cooking methods with healthier ones while maintaining similar tastes, flavors, and familiar dishes may be another useful approach to culturally sensitive promotion of healthy diets. Providing immigrants with nutrition-related advice which is compatible with their cultural values may prevent the development of unhealthy westernized food habits after migration.
IMPLICATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Results from this study support the importance of cultural sensitivity in nutrition communication. To achieve efficient nutrition communication with a multicultural audience, providers of nutrition-related advice should be aware of and implement the concept of cultural sensitivity. Nutrition communication can become more effective by increased knowledge, understanding of and respect for the audience’s food culture. Further studies should investigate how differences in knowledge, values and cultural beliefs influence nutrition communication in a multicultural setting. Responses of immigrants to nutrition-related advice based on the host country’s food culture should be evaluated, and different methods and approaches to achieving cultural sensitivity should be developed and tested.

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