

The Future of the Dinner Party: A Collaborative Food Research Methodology

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The Dinner Party is essentially a *food-centered focus group*, where

- The embodied experience of eating is valued as a means of creating and sharing knowledge
- Participants co-construct meaning through sharing 'data,' i.e. their experience and thoughts and by interacting with one another

- Focus Groups have long been lauded in the social sciences as a feminist methodology (Wilkinson 1998, Montell 1999, Pini 2002)
- The Dinner Party takes this a step further by centering the practice in an embodied eating experience
- This methodology has the potential to be notably democratic and accessible – everyone has stories to tell about food, so everyone is a potential participant in a dinner party research project
- This methodology values and honors the lived experience of all people as relevant to and worthy of research



Dinner Party Research Methodology Values:

- Co-creation of meaning
- Feminism
- Food & our interactions with it
- Getting others thinking about food!

The Dinner Party Research Methodology in Practice: *Nostalgia Dinner Series*



At a Nostalgia Dinner, 6 people gather to **eat food & talk memory**
talk food & eat memory
Each person brings a dish that evokes 'nostalgia' for them, presents it to the group, and we discuss

A facilitator leads the group discussion by

- Asking follow-up questions on participants' dishes and stories
- Structuring general discussion around relevant themes and research questions
- Drawing connections between dishes and emplacing them within food studies discourse
- Leading writing and drawing exercises

What are the goals of the Nostalgia Dinner Series?

- Gathering data for my research project
 - Data that is diverse, reliable, nuanced, and embodied
- Promoting Food Studies and encouraging people to engage thoughtfully with their food
- Establishing a food-centric, embodied, and collaborative research method

Case Study: *Brown Rice Pudding*

At one Nostalgia Dinner, a participant brought brown rice pudding, a favorite breakfast in childhood, which she had then seen as a luxurious treat. It was only when she was older that she realized the butter – sugar – rice dish was an inexpensive and easy way to use up leftover rice from dinner the night before, a tactic employed by her thrifty and loving single mother. When sharing the recipe, her mother included the note: "best served while running around trying to three children dressed before school."



In tasting and hearing about this food memory, we were able to open up discussion around:

- The non-edible components of food memory
- How food constructs interpersonal connection
- How food memories are re-inscribed over time
- Class construction of food memories
- How female-identified caregivers navigate social pressure to perform feeding labor and to demonstrate love as they do so

Issues & Obstacles of the Methodology

- Access
 - Cost of participation can exclude
 - Where and how the party is advertised and held will impact *who* can attend
 - The identity of the facilitator and the format of a dinner party itself may be alienating to some potential participants
 - 'Dinner parties' as described here are part of a particular Euro-American social context, shaped by the researcher's white, privileged background
- Silencing of voices
 - Group dynamics and facilitation style can result in some voices being silenced (Pini 2002)
 - The facilitator is responsible for creating a space in which all people can speak

Next Steps for Researchers

- Democratizing the Dinner Party Research Method
 - Make the Dinner Party Research Method freely and easily available and replicable (Nostalgia Dinner Kit in development)
 - Identify barriers to participation and find workarounds (i.e. cost offsetting, kitchen access, childcare)
 - Adapt format to other cultural settings

What would you bring to a Nostalgia Dinner?

What makes this dish *nostalgic* for you?
How is nostalgia different from food memory in general?

References

Pini, Barbara. 2002. "Focus groups, feminist research and farm women: opportunities for empowerment in rural social research." *Journal of Rural Studies* 18: 339-351.
Montell, Frances. 1999. "Focus group interviews: a new feminist method." *National Women's Studies Association Journal* 11 (1): 44-71.
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Photos by & Special Thanks to Alex Rogala

The Nostalgia Dinner Series has been reviewed and approved as exempt by the BU IRB. Protocol Number: 4813X
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