

Cosmologies of Selection: Lessons from the faculty biscuit tin

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Introduction

Staffrooms are an essential component of university life, providing social contact, rest and refreshment.

The kettle and the biscuit tin ('cookie jar' in certain cultures) are features of central significance to the effectiveness of the staffroom, rooted in human pan-societal conventions of eating and drinking together [1] which lead to social bonding. While providing nutrition in an accessible way, biscuits also function as 'comfort foods', associated with happy memories of childhood [1]; it is perhaps this that has led to their ubiquity in the workplace, which many perceive as stressful.

In general, biscuits function as 'snacks' [2]; an adjunct to principal nutritional events.

There are 28 categories of biscuit recognised by the British Government and detailed nutritional information is available for them [3]. Though the landscape of dietetics is changing [4], it is generally accepted that a healthy diet includes high fibre, low saturated fats and low sugar items, and that wholegrain cereals provide a more sustained release of energy that has health benefits for humans [5].

We were interested in the lived experience of biscuits as a culture sharing group in a medical educational setting, as conveyed by their behaviour and language, and therefore conducted an ethnography using a constructivist epistemology [6], a social constructionist interpretive framework [7,8] and a phenomenological methodology [9] which included analysis from the perspectives of deixis (the meaning of language in the context in which it

is used) [10] and cosmology(understanding about group or individual role and meaning in the order of the universe) [11].

Method

The ethnography was conducted on a Tuesday, which we perceived as neutral day of the week in terms of staff behaviour. We avoided Monday as it is not typical of weekdays; there are added stresses on faculty as a result of it being the first day in the School after a weekend. This might have impacted on the lived experience of the biscuits.

We observed the biscuits for an eight hour period (9am until 5pm) as this is when the majority of faculty are present.

This was not an immersive ethnography for practical reasons; we did not fit in the tin.

However, we observed the behaviour of the biscuits and talked with them frequently. We collected data using field notes.

Ethical considerations: we were mindful of ethical principles but there is no human deontology regarding biscuits, neither morally nor legally.

Analysis

Both authors independently analysed the data from a phenomenological perspective, then refined the analysis in discussion. After three iterations of this process consensus was reached. We practiced reflexivity by discussing our own perceptions of value of various types of biscuit, and rigorously challenged the effectiveness of each other's phenomenological bracketing [12].

Results

We did not wish to impose our conceptions of identity or value onto the groups of participants, so we asked them to define themselves. There were three semantic groups, to which we assigned group labels (see Table 1) corresponding to three of the 28 categories of biscuits recognised by the British Government [3].

<insert table 1 here>

There were equal proportions of representatives from each group present in the tin at the start of the study.

For the periods of time when the lid was on the tin, the biscuits used a word which included elements of 'resting', 'waiting', 'preparation' and 'apprehension' to describe their feelings. Sometimes there was complete silence when the biscuits felt settled and peaceful. At other times there was extrinsic noise, generally in the form of faculty vocalisation, when they became more alert. The situated meaning of this noise was that the tin was likely to be opened. The biscuits' semiotic articulation of it included 'destiny', 'achievement' and 'purpose'.

They described the subsequent events in terms of an unknowable force which would descend and make a selection while their world was flooded with light, using criteria of which they were unaware. The word for this force included descriptive elements suggestive of a multi-limbed organism, and semantic elements which included 'hunger', 'imperative' and 'greed', as well as 'destiny'. We refer to this element of the biscuits' cosmological perception as 'the Selector'. There was no observable competitiveness when the selection was being made, and absolute acceptance of it. All three groups were aware that groups B and C biscuits were more likely to be chosen in the early part of the day. Group A were the

only remaining participants by 3 pm and they experienced a particular phenomenon; the tin was opened for one or more very brief periods without the appearance of the Selector. Then, usually after two or three openings, the Selector would appear and remove one biscuit. It was noted that Selector approached this selection in a manner which the biscuits described in the same terms that they used for stale peers, which included elements of 'tired', 'soft', 'passed the use by date' and 'disappointed'.

By the end of the study period, only representatives of group A were still in the tin. . As the day progressed, the frequency of the appearance of the Selector reduced. The biscuits constructed this as a positive reality; their health giving properties meant that a smaller quantity was needed to fulfil the Selector's needs. While the Selector seemed to be more enthusiastic about groups B and C, it still needed group A biscuits and that each one was more satisfying than those in groups B and C, who might be more beguiling, but less sustaining, and therefore less fit for purpose.

Discussion

This ethnography suggests that biscuits in a faculty biscuit tin perceive themselves to have a value to a discriminating Selector, and while they have no awareness of the criteria used for selection, they are able to speculate about their relative value. Members of group A were able to socially construct [7,8] an explanation related to their own lived experience; that while they might not be as immediately attractive as the other groups in the tin, the Selector still needed them and they had a particular value in terms of a sustained (but unspecified) benefit. The nutritional information shown in table 1 substantiates the group A biscuits' ideas, if considered from a purely dietary perspective. They have higher levels of

protein and fibre, fewer calories and lower levels of saturated fats and sugars than those in groups B and C.

The strengths of this work are its methodology and strong theoretical framework, the major limitation was related to MB's reputational concerns; talking with biscuits is neither a cultural nor an institutional norm, and this reduced the frequency of her interaction with them. While it is important to recognise the uniqueness of the biscuits' own ontology, there may be some lessons for medical schools from their cosmology.

In our admissions processes, we may select those applicants who have some generally accepted desirable characteristics, analogous to the coatings and inclusions of the biscuits we observed in our ethnography. These characteristics may be predictive of value, and they may be situation specific and therefore not transferrable. We may be failing to give enough consideration to less obvious but enduring and transferrable characteristics. While many educators talk about the importance of assessing academic and non-academic attributes [13,14], and specifically ones which are difficult to measure such as enthusiasm and motivation [15], there is little evidence that some non-academic characteristics thought to be desirable are actually helpful or useful and they may be a distraction from the main purpose of the selection. In the case of biscuits, this should be nutrition for the human body, in the case of medical students that they make good doctors. To take the analogy further, is being an accomplished athlete, musician or socialite a reliable indicator for being a good doctor or a potentially harmful characteristic, like chocolate on a biscuit? And is there a tendency to overlook and undervalue less flamboyant characteristics like patience, an ability to be 'other-person centred' or to sustainably nourish others?

Of course, things are rarely simple, and while biscuits may be technically dietary items, there are other reasons why humans may value some of their specific attributes [1] even when the evidence is that they are not beneficial, and so it may be with potential doctors.

Razack et al [16] suggest that we should avoid 'one authoritative definition of excellence' that requires applicants to strive to comply with it. There was no such striving amongst the biscuits, which suggests that they and their Selector were able to recognise that those in group A had a particular role in meeting the Selector's needs.

Conclusion

There may be lessons to be learned from the faculty biscuit tin about medical student selection. Further research is needed to explore selection decision making processes and the validity of the range of non-academic characteristics which are currently used to predict good doctors.

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Table 1: characteristics and nutritional values of the biscuits in the ethnography.

Group	Biscuits' own semantic descriptor	UK government category ^[3]	Protein (g/100g)	Energy (kJ/100g)	Fibre (g/100g)	Saturated Fatty Acids (g/100g)	Total Sugars (g/100g)
A	Biscuits with health giving properties	'digestives-plain'	6.2	463	2.7	7.71	17.5
B	Biscuits with a uni- planar chocolate coating	'short or sweet biscuits, half coated in chocolate'	6	2124	1.9	12.5	35.6
C	Biscuits with some form of inclusion, either fruit (in the form of a paste or discrete entities) or other items such as chocolate chips.	'chocolate chip cookies-standard'	5.4	1973	2.2	12.15	30
		'fruit biscuits'	5.1	1735	2.3	7.51	29.6

