

Food, loneliness and ageing in Catalonia: the social dimension of food behaviour¹

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This article focuses on the relationship between the following three concepts: ageing, loneliness and food. Our analytical and methodological proposal aims at understanding the experience of loneliness that people over 64 living in Barcelona may encounter, through the description and analysis of food and its practice; that is, all those aspects (in)directly related to the food practice. Though our analysis is focused on food, we will stress the social –rather than nutritional– dimension of food behaviour. Thus our point of departure is the organic relationship established between food, society and culture (Contreras 1995).

Loneliness –as it has been greatly stated by social gerontology and sociology– is a theoretically and conceptually complex term (De Jong Gierveld 1999; Victor et al. 2000). Rather than an “objective reality”, loneliness is connected with the way people assess their net of social relationships and their own levels of interaction and social engagement; that is, the way they perceive their social environment. In this article we are not merely interested in whether the elderly live alone or not and get on well with either their family –if they have any–, friends or neighbours. What interests us is the analysis of the social processes related to loneliness and the way old people experience it. What do the elderly mean by ‘loneliness’? How do they refer to it? How do they think of ‘loneliness’? What do the old people mean when they say they ‘feel alone’ or ‘afraid of loneliness’, when they show ‘signs of loneliness’ or when they state that ‘being alone’ is the biggest problem the elderly have to cope with? What do they tell us about the social context where ‘loneliness’ manifests itself? These are some of the questions we want to adress. As we will see, food practices will

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provide us with a space and a language –symbolic if we like– extremely rich for our study.

Our analysis starts from a basic premise: the food practice *expresses and puts in motion processes and social and affective relations* which gain sense within a specific historical, social and personal context. The objective is to highlight which type of social relations are expressed through food practice and how a circumstance of loneliness –seen as the weakening of the dynamics of relationships, whose context favours the processes of social integration– re-signifies these relations.

The interest in this subject comes from a statement which has arisen during the course of the fieldwork carried out in Barcelona: food taking appears, within the *daily routine* of the generations which have been classified for our object of study –those who were born between the 10's and the 30's of the 20th c.– as a *basic context of social and affective relation and, at the same time, as a strong means of communication*. As the more than seventy in-depth interviews realised to people older than 64 –living alone or living with others– show us, without stopping talking about food, without leaving the *semantic scope of food*, it is possible for us to go through and signify –from the tools that ethnography gives us– the processes and the net of social and affective relations which organise and, to a certain extent, give meaning to the social lives of these people. Then, for example, family relations and friendship with neighbours and their social environment take shape through the language of food taking and its practice.

What we are interested in analysing is how the *experience of loneliness* – which can be caused by different factors, such as the fact of widowing, by losing parents or siblings with whom one has always lived, by their children leaving home, suffering from physical handicaps which might make them feel dependent, by the retirement or because they are getting old– takes shape and is expressed through the language of food. This will help give meaning to the social and emotional processes which –apart from their nutritional consequences– affect and, in fact, underlie the food choice and food behaviour of the elderly.

For this, we have chosen to present three case studies which we considered extremely rich from an ethnographic point of view and particularly

relevant for the analysis. In all these case studies, the experience of loneliness –which is diverse– takes shape through food practice. In particular, ‘eating alone’ is seen as a strong experience of loneliness; the ‘loss of appetite’, as a way of demanding attention while being alone and the ‘fear of not being able to cook’, as an expression of the fear of loneliness. As it will be seen, the family and the scene of changes that have taken place as regards the care for old people over the last thirty years have become the common place where the feelings of emotional shortage and dissatisfaction –usually associated with the experience of loneliness (Hazan 1980; De Jong Gierveld 2003)– arise more vehemently. The meaning and the experience of social change (and prescriptive transformation) as regards the net of social and affective relations surrounding the ageing process is, then, as we will see, the conceptual framework that allows us to establish a connection between the experienced loneliness, understood as the lack of a satisfactory social and affective net, and the social isolation, understood as the lack of social integration (individual-society).³ These empirical and conceptual referents, which are socially clear, are the grounds for the present article. Let us see then how our interviewees talk and feel through the language of food and appetite, and how the meaning of their words and their behaviours are related to their own experience of loneliness.

Eating alone as a hard experience of loneliness (Ramon’s case study)

“To eat alone is the saddest thing in the world”, says Ramon, a 91-year-old widower, who lives by himself in the flat he shared with his wife for more than 50 years. His wife, Rosa, suffered an embolism when she was 82. She died at home, five years after. During the years of her illness, he looked after her and cooked for her. Since she died he has never cooked again. He has not gone to the market either, where they used to go shopping together. He now does the shopping by phone. In fact, he has not gone out for a year. He has serious problems in his legs and his back, he suffers from osteoporosis and has a hiatus hernia, which almost makes him immobile. When his wife died, his

³ Victor et al. (2004: 108) distinguish loneliness from other similar –though not equivalent– terms such as *being alone* (time spent on their own), *living alone* (description of their life with other people within the same domestic unit) and *social isolation* (the level of social integration of the individuals within their social environment).

health rapidly deteriorated. His flat, in the centre of the Gothic borough of Barcelona, does not have a lift. A hundred stairs separate him from the street. He cannot go up and down the stairs. The street also frightens him, he finds it dirty and dangerous. Usually a social worker (from Cáritas Diocesana), who comes three times a week, cooks for him. The carer is almost the only person he has contact with. Ramon does not have any children or close family, but for a nephew to whom he hardly sees. Financially, he receives a minimum retirement pension on which he can hardly survive.

“Any elderly person –he says– has great difficulties when it comes to cooking, but there is one problem which doesn’t have a solution, and this is loneliness, the absence of a company. No matter how good your health is, when it comes to getting in the kitchen to make a simple dish just for yourself, you do it mechanically, without any interest, because you know that once at the table you will eat it more or less happily depending on how hungry you are, but without anyone congratulating you, accompanied only by your own shadow and a sad and cold atmosphere.

[...] While my wife was ill I was in charge of the cooking, and I turned out to be a first class cook. What cooking requires for me is to feel like doing it and, then the will, and love, love for cooking, love for the ones at home to enjoy it, love for the ego, for oneself also. I started by making just the simple things more badly than well, and I ended up making haute cuisine dishes and doing it really well. I used to make a fideuá (a pasta paella) which was so delicious, I have made raviolis, but everything, even the pasta and the filling I used to make, and the sauce, and the whole thing. And cannelloni and rice. I have found the secret of rice. Cooking is a study. The thing is to have some measurements, to have a plan, a clock, scales and then you can start saying you are a cook, not before. Cooking wants its hours, its time, for things to boil outrageously, for things to cook softly, usually always rather softly than at top speed, and then you have a selected cuisine.

[...] To start cooking for oneself is not the same, is not the same because even the cooking utensils are not the same. Just now I had a small frying pan that Rosa –his wife– used to love, she said it was so good for making fried eggs. But it has disappeared, because for my wife and me, for two fried eggs,

that one is better, but just for one fried egg, the egg dances around in there. This frying pan is adequate for a two egg omelette. For my wife and me, I would make a potato omelette or an artichoke omelette or a butifarra (Catalan pork sausage) omelette, or a plain omelette, with two eggs. Now I don't make them anymore, because two eggs is too much for me, and for the one egg one either the frying pan is too big or the omelette is too small. And the measurements, even having scales, for the measurements it doesn't work. Another tedious thing is what you say: now have to make rice just for me for only one meal? It doesn't work out, it doesn't work out because there is no room for the sauce nor for the rice. However, for two is different. And then, for example, I used to say to my wife, 'today I will make you some meat balls that will be a delight!'. 'Oh, yes!' she would say. It was how excited she was about the meat balls. 'Great meat balls!', she would say, 'they taste delicious!'. And, you would be pleased for making what she liked, and then you also liked it, you would also eat it with pleasure. My wife was such a lively person, very brave. I would make all kinds of things and we enjoyed them. Since I've been alone I haven't cooked anymore, I'm not excited about it. I eat any junk.

[...] Now –he comments in relation to today's food– the food is not good at all, chicken for example, is already all spoiled, the cows are mad. Vegetables are not being looked after like before, they're full of chemicals. The presentation is better, but they're not good at all. They gave fish flour to cows, they became mad. [...] The block I live in –he says– has also changed a lot. Ten years ago we used to all know each other, I had everyone's telephone number. Now I only have two, and the rest don't even say hello to me, and before, if somebody was on their own the neighbours would run to help them. Before, you would wake up and you would hear someone singing, another one would say: 'come on, breakfast is getting cold, it's late!'. This square here, at night it was all lit up, and you would hear one making dinner, the other talking, the little girl crying. Now it's dead, dark, and it's full of neighbours, full of people you don't even know. And the street is the same, you only find schizophrenics, drug addicts and alcoholics. Now, you can't go down. [...] The world has gone crazy. My nephew for example, the son of my wife's sister, took his mother to an old people's home. As soon as he left her there her son said to her: 'I won't be back until Sunday'. He didn't go for eight days. I couldn't have stood it. Apparently –he

continues— it was her who asked to be taken to the old people's home. She lived in Cerdanyola, at the outskirts of Barcelona, alone, she shut herself away and was afraid of falling down. She arrived at the home when she was 93, she died at 94, four months after my wife had died. Life is funny, this is the same as cooking, some times you make excellent meals and other times you make a meal that you can just throw away. Life is a pain."

To the loneliness he feels now, Ramon contrasts the memory of the shared meals and the good eating. "In Hostalric –the village where he and his wife used to spend the summers, he says– we had made such a delicious charcoal-grilled meat, we had made some great roasted chickens. Before, it all used to be farm houses, wheat fields, sheep, goat, apple trees, vineyard fields. Now everything has been sold, the things of modernity. For Easter, all the families used to come, the children with the Easter cakes, the elder ones with the charcoal-grilled ribs, that was a life!. We used to go mushroom picking, we took the basket, we walked for a quarter of an hour, ten minutes... you started looking and you had the basket full straight away. We could then go back home and there you are, charcoal-grilled mushrooms for dinner. We set up the tables and the armchairs and everyone ate there. Near us there lived another family, they ate just around the corner from us, and you had the advantage of hearing how they laughed, how they talked. We didn't see each other, but that was like saying, I need an onion, and you went there straight away to get the onion. I had a small wineskin, good wine right from there, from Hostalric, and we added half a wineskin more so that it didn't get dry, and in winter we took a glass of that wine, it was a dry sherry, a delicacy. With that wineskin you had great wine. We were having lunch or dinner and any neighbour would come with a glass to get some wine from the wineskin. They roasted chicken or meat and added a glass of wine from the wineskin and the meat would come out lovely. And it also had a smell... you cannot imagine how a glass of that wine gave so much aroma and so much flavour to the chicken and to the meat. You went to the butchers and you had the pork scratchings just being made, and the lady from the shop said to us: 'the butifarras (pork sausages) are just being finished, will you wait for a moment? Yes, well the black butifarra you like so much is just coming', and it was so nice this thing of 'hello Mrs. Rosa, how are you Mr. Ramon', that cordiality, that harmony. Now –he says– I am alone like a dog. I

only have the company of my work (he writes in his spare time), but they are not real solutions, they are not human, they are not logical.”

The loss of appetite as a way of demanding attention while being alone (Teresa’s case study)

When faced with the experience of loneliness, the elderly usually lose their interest in cooking. In some cases –as we have seen with Ramon– many situations such as lack of interest in food, lack or even loss of appetite might arise and become a serious health problem. Losing interest in cooking and food means –in some other cases– a way of demanding attention from the closer social and family environment. Teresa (79) has spent the last 23 years of her life alone, but she starts feeling loneliness now. She is a widow and has got a daughter, who lived with her until she got married in 1981. “I had never felt alone –says Teresa– but now I do. It gets on my nerves. I am very nervous. I have worked very hard (she worked as an administrative in an enterprise) and now it seems I am wasting time. It seems my nerves make my stomach hurt. I don’t know. But I feel alone and now I realise I am alone. I say to myself ‘listen, you must accept it because there is no way around it’.” Also, she has started to lose appetite: “I’ve lost my appetite for the last one month and a half or so, I don’t know if this is due to my nerves, which affect my stomach, or to whatever else”. Although she does not want to eat and doesn’t feel hungry, she hasn’t given up eating. “I eat –says Teresa– because I have to, I do it to fill my stomach. Some days I don’t feel like eating at all and others it is no so bad, but I do eat.” Her feeling of loss of appetite changes a little bit when she eats with her family, at her daughter’s: “Of course, you start getting a stitch because you have eaten more than what you are used to. It’s normal, you are with your family you chat with them, drink more, it’s normal, and these days you do eat. It’s not that you eat too much and you only think of food but you are with your family and, therefore, don’t feel alone. What influences me more is the fact of being with my family”. When her husband was alive and her daughter still living with them, Teresa did cook ordinary well-prepared meals. Now, she prepares more simple meals because she doesn’t remember how to cook and doesn’t even like it. “Before –says Teresa with nostalgia– I cooked a lot. On Sundays, when we

were together at home, I used to cook quite a lot, but now it's been so long since then. Now I cook everything grilled, nothing cooked in a casserole. Now I don't feel like cooking, it's too much work. Macaroni for instance, I cook them but not au gratin." She even doesn't feel like cooking for others.

Teresa gets the retirement and the widow's pension: "Not needing anyone makes a big difference –says Teresa–. I might need my daughter physically and morally, because I sometimes phone her to speak, but I don't depend on anyone economically. And being able to live on your own without asking for money is important. There are parents who depend on their children. Up to now I need them morally but not economically." Contradictory feelings towards her search for her family support –in this case her daughter's– come to the surface through Teresa's words when she refers to the possibility of moving out to her daughter's house. "If they told me to move out to my daughter's, I don't know.. 'cos I'm very independent and after being alone for so long... well, I don't know, we'll see. If by any chance, one day my daughter says 'listen, mum, we've looked for a bigger flat and you can come to live with us...' I don't know, I mean, I don't know what I'd do. Maybe I'd move out with her, because companionship, and everyone says that a daughter is better than a daughter-in-law. I get on really well with my son-in-law, he's so nice and cares for me."

Although Teresa and her daughter don't talk about this very often, Teresa remembers a conversation with her son-in-law when he had just married her daughter. He had been brought up by an aunt and he had sometimes commented the possibility of suggesting Teresa and his aunt to live with them. " 'Pepe –says Teresa– do you know what you are saying? Two old women in your house? You'd like to go out and we'd like to stay at home, it's all a...' , but this happened about 20 years ago. This was something we talked about in 1983, but has never been mentioned again since then. Sometimes he says, 'we should look for a bigger flat'. But who knows, maybe one day, I don't know, I'm 79, nearly 80, I don't know. [...] When my daughter got married they looked for a flat and I helped them. They could have lived here with us, because there are two rooms, but 'married people need a home of their own'. And that's true, when I got married, I was living with my mother and my brother and I wanted a flat of my own. I understand children must be independent and get by on their own. But when my daughter got married I told them: 'live your own life but don't

forget that you've got your mother and you, Pepe, have got your aunt, we brought you into this world and you must take care of us'. I don't regret having said that." Then Teresa mentions her mother. She always lived with Teresa's brother and her sister-in-law. She only spent some months at Teresa's. She died when she was 91 and only stayed five days in hospital. They were told she was just very old, nothing else could be done. She was never taken to a nursing home: "going to a nursing home? No way! I always tell my brother: 'mum was never alone because she either stayed with you or with me but we're both alone.' He's got two children, a son and a daughter, but of course, they're married. They keep in touch with him by phone and go to see him but as I tell him 'we're alone, you know' ".

Fear of not being able to cook or fear of loneliness (Antònia's case study)

Feeling unable to cook for others is something that usually goes along with getting old. It seems interesting the fear some women express towards the possibility of losing –mainly due to health problems– this ability.

Antònia, 78, is widow and lives alone. She's got two children and a daughter, the youngest lives next to her and has lunch and dinner at her mum's. Also she's got grandchildren and nephews, most of whom live in Lleida, Antònia's home town. Antònia and her husband moved to Barcelona when he retired. Some years later her husband dies. She hasn't got used to city life, she feels homesick and misses her neighbourhood in Lleida. She lives in her own flat in Sants (with a lift) and gets a widow's pension, which helps her come through it all but with some difficulties. Antònia suffers from degenerative osteoarthritis, which restricts her movements of legs and hands and makes it more difficult to cook. Her hearing and her sight aren't very good either (she wears a hearing aid), which hinders her going out alone. Streets are full of obstacles, she usually walks slowly holding on walls and doesn't hear cars behind her. She has always been a good cook and found it a pleasure to cook for others. However, now she can hardly cook. She says it is painful to wash the dishes. She is afraid of not being able to cook one day. She thinks from that day people will not pay her a visit anymore. After her parents' and husband's death

she has never smiled again. Her brothers have also died. She feels alone and sad and in thinking of coming back to her home town in Lleida.

She used to enjoy her food, but now she doesn't like casseroles unless – as she says– their children come home: “If my children come and say, ‘mum, make us spaghetti with a cream of ceps’ (Catalan mushrooms), I make them. When it comes to cooking there's no-one to touch me!”. Last time she invited her nephew to lunch, he didn't go: “but, dear aunt –he told her– you can hardly cope with cook for yourself, is too much work for you, if you invite people home”. “I've worked really hard in the kitchen –adds Antònia–, but now I can't help wondering if my cooking will turn out well or not...” His youngest son (40) lives next to her flat, he's single and has lunch and dinner everyday at her mother's: “At night, for dinner he only takes a peach or some oranges. If I don't have any, I go out and buy them. He may also take some mandarins or a pear and that's all. He doesn't want to take anything else for dinner. Today, for lunch, I've made some French fries, which he has been asking for since Monday, and two biological eggs.” When she has lunch alone, she eats whatever: “I eat more when he is in. Recently he's been away for a few days and I have eaten very little. I ate very little and I thought, well I'll save a little bit, but when he's here, obviously, we are two and I buy more fish, and well, you know what it means, I've always been... my mother did exactly the same thing, she would say: ‘help yourselves first and if there's anything left I'll help myself and if not...’ I always done exactly the same. He is served first and if there's nothing left for me, I cook something else. I have no problems. I boil with garlic onions and a poached egg and I just eat that.”

Apart from cooking for him, Antònia does her son's housework: “I iron his shirts, smooth his sheets out, I do it at all, but then I need to have a lie-down because I feel a terrible backache. I still want to keep on working though. My son really takes care of me, when I'm ill he looks after me and worries about me. He is a very good boy, indeed. My daughter, on the contrary, is very authoritarian. She usually makes me shut up and when she does so she makes my stomach turn. I get on much better with my niece than with my own daughter. My niece keeps asking me to go to Sort, to Lleida and live there, but I don't want to be away from my children, especially from my son, who gets home from work really tired and if I weren't there, I don't know what he'd do.”

Antònia feels lonely, tired and she does not feel like doing anything: “I’m alone –she says –. I’ve got children, but they work and can’t care for me. They get on with their own life. When a woman is widowed, she feels like a vulnerable. I am unable to do anything. I’m frightened of everything. I’m that kind of person that enjoys giving herself, I like people. And being alone all day long at home... people say that laughing helps and being alone atrophies one’s brain”. She considers that getting old in small town is quite different from getting old in a city: “In a small town –says Antònia looking back over her childhood– we were a big family. People from a small town are more outgoing, whereas your neighbours in a city don’t even know your name. There, whenever we had some food, we shared it out. Annual Festivals from other towns were so lovely! I used to go to some people’s house, my brother went to others, everyone was welcome and we’re a big family. When I was nine I could kill a rabbit, a chicken or a lamb for our Festa Major, the town’s annual festival. Rabbits, after being killed, must be opened very little and gutted with the hand. Then, the liver of the rabbit is cooked. We used to take some ham and meat and prepared the stuffing with it. At Carnival time we also made the carnival stuffing. We cooked with breadcrumbs, raisins and eggs –many eggs-, garlic and parsley. When we slit a lamb’s throat, we gutted it and we mixed its big gut with breadcrumbs, garlic and parsley. Then we stuffed the lamb with this mixture and boiled it all in a soup kitchen. Once boiled it was fried together with the lamb head and legs. This was cooked for our ‘Festa Major’ (town’s annual festival) and it tasted delicious. People enjoyed that for breakfast! Some days, for instance, we cooked boiled potatoes with cod, others we made a delicious ‘escudella de pagès’ (a traditional Catalan stew made with meat and chickpeas) with pieces of ‘butifarra’ (Catalan pork sausages). On Sundays, we used to cook rice. And we killed some pigs, which would weigh 200 kilograms, we killed four or five pigs. First, one was killed in October. Once the slap-up meal was over, the pig was killed. And then, after January 6th, we killed the other four pigs one after another and spent the whole week making the stuffings. Many people were invited and helped us with everything. It was very nice, but now it all has changed a great deal. I find it quite different now, I say to my daughter... people come here and I, if I could... but I cannot neither invite anyone home nor take them to a restaurant. And I still remember that.”

As we had already seen with Ramon, the ideal of living together is expressed with the remembrance of meals shared. Not being able to cook announces, in the case of Antònia, loneliness.

Food and loneliness

Although the above stated cases show very different personal circumstances, along with different experiences of loneliness and widowhood, some general considerations can be drawn.

As it has become plain from Ramon's testimony, being forced to eat alone is a moment when the experience of loneliness becomes more accentuated, especially when this experience –as in Ramon's case– is due to the disappearance or weakening of the closer family and affective environment. It is a moment when the lack of social and affective relations becomes more evident and stronger. Eating alone is also –socially and culturally speaking– a semantically hard moment, full of feelings related to the sociability and companionship ("having to eat alone –he said– is the saddest thing in the world".) Cooking, like food, gains sense within the social relation, at the same time as there are meals that *cannot be thought of outside the social relation*, which demand and condense commensality. ['Do I now have to make rice just for myself just for one meal? It doesn't work out because there is no room for the sauce nor for the rice', Ramon said]. Consequently, to eat alone signifies and experiences itself in relation to eating accompanied, within a heartfelt *absence of social relation*, and refers to a major circumstance of loneliness, which in turn has an effect on the food behaviour. Since he became a widower he eats –as he himself says– "any junk", he does not cook anymore, not because he doesn't know how to or is unable to ["he came to be a first class cook", he said to us] but because the *affective motivation* has disappeared: to cook he doesn't find it exciting anymore, as he says. To open the kitchen just for himself does not make sense ["Cooking requires the feel for it, it wants will and love, love for cooking, love for the ones at home to enjoy it, love for the ego, for oneself", he commented]. Expressions such as "to eat any junk" in comparison to "eat happily" –this last related to the social and affective dimension of food taking– *put in relation in a clear way present and past*: the

present recovers and re-signifies the past; the past, in turn, signifies the present and gives sense and meaning –in this case– to the *lack of appetite* of our interviewee.

The relation with the body –lacking in appetite– equally gains sense in this same relation. More than a lack of appetite –which no doubt appears– the story of our interviewee reveals a *loss of meaning* [“No matter how good your health is –he commented– when it comes to getting in the kitchen to make yourself a simple dish, just for yourself, you do it mechanically, without any interest, because you know that once at the table you will eat it more or less happily depending on how hungry you are, but without anyone congratulating you, accompanied just by your own shadow and a sad and cold atmosphere”]. Faced with the present loneliness –and faced with the process of “isolation” and reclusion upon himself that widowing has brought him–, Ramon contrasts the memory of the good eating, of the shared meals and of a whole life lived in company [“That was a life!”, he exclaimed remembering the meals at Hostalric]. The remembrance of shared meals condenses the experience of a shared life, whose meaning can hardly be found beyond this relation. Food appears as a space of recreation and yearning for the past and present, which takes on its meaning from the current loneliness. Remembrance and memory put into relation present and past: the present signifies itself in the past [the experience of loneliness gains sense in relation and opposition to the past]; the past, in turn, re-signifies itself during the course of its recovery and re-creation from the present, from a circumstance, in this case, of loneliness. The memory and remembrance are both repositories of social meaning, they are ways of keeping alive the meaning: they are sources of identity.

Food taking is also a social act; the notion of “appetite” condenses social relation, condenses identity. The circumstance of loneliness puts in relation the social and physiological aspects characteristic of the food fact in a different way. The coldness of the “simple dishes”, “made mechanically”, and the sadness of sitting by oneself to eat, to satisfy “hunger” –more than the “appetite”– contrasts itself in his memory to the warmth and the illusion of the shared meals. The present loneliness bares and, to a certain extent, *strips* the food of its social dimension or reason, leading it to its almost mechanisation. Ramon eats because he has to. The physiological –as we said– seems to break away from

the social. Aspects of a more physiological order arrange, structure and signify, from this moment, his daily diet (food intake and food preparation). This way, feelings such as “hunger” and physiological acts such as “swallowing” substitute, in his experience of loneliness, the “appetite” and “eating” in his memory of commensality. With the absence of commensality or social relation, eating becomes de-socialised, and even de-humanised, as life itself [“Now, I am alone like a dog. I accompany myself only with my work, but they are not real solutions, they are not human, they are not logical”]. All that food comes down to is the mere ingestion. We could say that the lack of appetite expresses –in this case– the lack of the feeling to live.

Teresa’s case study makes us reflect once again on the loss of appetite [“I’ve lost my appetite for the last one month and a half or so”] in relation to the experience of loneliness [“I had never felt alone, but now I do”]. However, the contrast arises very quickly: when she has lunch at her daughter’s, she does eat [“these days you do eat because you are with your family, you chat with them, drink more, it’s normal... It’s not that you eat too much and only think of food, it’s because you are with your family and, therefore, don’t feel alone”]. What influences her most, then, is the fact of being with her family, as Teresa herself tells us. Her previous ordinary well-prepared meals –the ones she would cook when her husband was alive and her daughter was living with them– contrast with the “simple things” she now makes for herself [“Now I cook everything grilled, nothing cooked in a casserole”, Teresa said]. Once again cooking demands social interaction and condenses commensality. Her normal food practices equal her ordinary meals with her family and her cooking for them [“I used to cook ordinary meals”]. The loss of appetite along with the willingness to cook –as we had already seen in a similar way in the case of Ramon– express the experience of loneliness in relation to one’s family eloquently [“On Sundays, when the three of us were together at home, I used to cook quite a lot, but now it’s been so long since then”]. Again being forced to eat alone leads to a process of *physiologicalisation* and *desritualisation* of meals. The act of eating –when one eats alone– emerges from its social and ritual dimension [“I eat because I have to, I do it to fill my stomach”, Teresa told us]. The oversight –or the attitude of forgetting how to cook– she was referring to [“I

don't remember how to cook and don't even like it"] expresses a feeling of dissatisfaction with the fact of not having the opportunity to cook more frequently. To a certain extent, she might also feel condemned to that obscurity, as it can be inferred from the ambivalent language of people's care ["I understand children must be independent and get by on their own. But when my daughter got married I told them, 'live your own life but don't forget that you've got your mother and you, Pepe, have got your aunt, we brought you into this world and you must take care of us' "]. Being looked after by children is seen as a right not only because parents have brought them up and given everything ["their life", says Teresa] but also because parents remember taking care of their own parents long time ago and, thus, they now expect the same behaviour from their children. Children's care for their parents –as it can be inferred from Teresa's testimony– is considered as a *moral issue*. This is the pattern of behaviour Teresa has learnt from her experience with her own parents. The ambiguity she uses is quite significant: it condenses her own experience with her parents with her expectations of being looked after by her children. Her experience of loneliness, clearly stated as the reason for her "loss of appetite", connects the fact of being retired ["I feel as if I were wasting time", she said] and widowhood with a clear fear of how the new model that rules intergenerational relations might affect the elderly. This fear also accounts for her own experience of loneliness. Family arises once again –as we had already seen in a similar way with Ramon's situation– as the *last resort for attention and sociability*. We realise, then, that the analysis of certain terms such as "expectation" –the way it is created and developed–, "lure" and "acceptance" –the way they take place– lead us to historical and sociological understanding of the experience of loneliness among the elderly. On the other hand, the ambiguity used to express the above mentioned expectations or to demand social and affective attention from the family unit –and from society itself– becomes a main concept –as it can be seen in the case of Teresa– in order to grasp the scale of the social and emotional complexity of the experience of loneliness.

Not being able to cook announces, in the case of Antònia, loneliness because this fact may reduce or modify –as she states– the potential spaces for meeting with her family ["I cannot neither invite anyone home nor take them to a

restaurant...”, regretted Antònia, while she remembered her nephew’s reply to her invitation for lunch [“You can hardly cope with cooking for yourself, it’s too much work for you if you invite people home”]. Her fear of not being able to cook –which basically expresses her fear of losing the capacity of giving herself or giving something to the others [“I love cooking for people, I’m that kind of person who likes offering everything...”]– reveals a deeper worry to keep the closer environment of sociability. It is a social fear what is being expressed [“I’ve worked really hard in the kitchen, but now I can’t help wondering if my cooking will turn out well or not...”]. Feeding people, either inviting people home for lunch or take them to a restaurant, becomes for Antònia’s daily life of loneliness –as for many other women– an almost institutionalised resort of family and social getting together. Cooking for people not only generates social interaction but also legitimates and reproduces her gender identity.

Antònia’s loss of taste for stewed meals –as she points out– is also a sign of loneliness. However excellent cook she is [“when it comes to cooking there’s no-one to touch me!, she said], she hardly ever cooks unless her children ask her to do so [“if my children come and say: “mum, make us spaghetti with a cream of ceps (Catalan mushrooms), I make them”]. Losing “interest” for stewed meals –in its double sense, physiological (as taste) and social (as pleasure)– refers to –in the same way with Ramon and Teresa– a *loss of motivation and sense* directly related to the weakening of their environment of family sociability [“I’m alone. I’ve got children, but they work and can’t care for me. They get on with their life. When a woman is widowed, she feels vulnerable”, she said]. Thus it is the social (agglutinating) aspect of food which produces the taste for cooking and eating stewed meals. Antònia counters this noticeable absence of taste for food –as Ramon would also do– her remembrance of good meals and family getting together (commensality) around a table [“we were a family”, she remembered looking back over her life in her hometown. “People from a small town are more outgoing, whereas your neighbours in a big city don’t even know your name. There, whenever we had some food, we shared it out (food must be shared out). [...] Many people were invited and helped us with everything. It was very nice, but now it all has changed a great deal”].

Within her experience of loneliness and vulnerability, there appears a *sublimation of her relationship with her son*, which is expressed clearly through food, the way she cooks for him [“today, for lunch, I’ve made some French fries, which he has been asking for since Monday, and two biological eggs...”], shops for him [“when he’s here, obviously, we are two and I buy more fish...”] and the way she distinguishes what she eats from what her son does [“my mother did exactly the same thing... he’s served first and if there’s nothing left for me, I cook something else. I have no problems, I boil some dry bread from the previous day, garlic, onions and a poached egg and I just eat that”...]. When she has lunch alone because her son is away, Antònia eats whatever [“I eat more when he is in. Recently, he’s been away for a few days and I have eaten very little...”, Antònia told us]. According to what she says, she must be useful to the person she loves in order to have her affective needs fulfilled; that is, to fight loneliness [“I iron his shirts, smooth his sheets out, I do it all, but then I need to have a lie-down because I feel a terrible backache. I still want to keep on working though. He gets home from work really tired and if I weren’t there, I don’t know what he’d do”, said Antònia referring to her son. “My son really takes care of me, when I’m ill he looks after me and worries about me. He’s a very good boy, indeed. He really cares for me”, she added]. The experience of loneliness reveals itself, within Antònia’s life cycle, greatly affected by the experience of gender. Thus, a *gendered loneliness* is being announced. Antònia’s fear of being unable to cook for other people (even for her son) expresses her deep sense of unease considering the possibility of being alone. Taking into account Arber *et al.*’s (2003) recently stated theories, we should draw our attention to the way these experiences of loneliness are associated with gender identity, which, for its part, might generate different expectations as regards intra/intergenerational relations.

Final considerations

As it can be clearly stated from our interviewees’ testimony, food taking is a conduct that goes beyond its own purpose since it also replaces, sums up and relates to other conducts (Barthes 1961: 985 in Contreras 1995). Some phenomena such as the ‘loss of appetite’, the ‘loss of taste for stewed food’,

'eating junk food', 'loss of interest or enthusiasm for cooking', 'forgetting how to cook', 'eating as an obligation' or 'eating just to fill the stomach' cannot be understood without taking into account social relations or, even more specifically, the feeling of dissatisfaction –seen as loneliness– with these actual social relations. Thus, hunger and taste appear and get meaning, to a great extent, within this experienced loneliness. Losing the appetite or taste, which are characteristic of the loneliness experienced by our interviewees, refers back to a loss of meaning or 'disengagement' towards their social and vital environment. On the contrary, expressions such as 'feel like eating', 'cook well-prepared meals' or 'enjoy eating' take place within a context of people getting together to have a meal and are usually associated with eating with the family. Family itself –rather than other contexts of social relations– and changes that may have taken place within this unit become the referent where loneliness is considered and experienced. All in all, social aspects, rather than merely nutritional and biological –as stated by Rowe & Kahn (1997)– seem to be essential in order to understand our interviewees' food behaviour.

As Contreras points out, the interest in nutrition or food in general exclusively oriented by the dietetic or economic worries might not take into account the concomitances that the complex phenomenon of food behaviour has. Not paying attention to such concomitances may lead to a misunderstanding of food behaviour (1995: 10). Like a long tradition of anthropological research focused on food have highlighted (Contreras 1995; De Garine 1995; Messer 1995; Caplan 1997; Counihan & Van Esterik 1997; Quandt 1999; Atkins & Bowler 2001) our informant reports show the way food is *embedded* into all aspects of social life, as well as *food's extraordinary ability to convey meaning and identity*. Thus, by looking at the way food relates itself with all these other aspects of social life, we can actually get a better *comprehension* of food choice and practices among elders. This article has tried to highlight the fact that the experience of loneliness is expressed through food taking and how the social and cultural dimension of food practice underlies –to a great extent– the food behaviour of the elderly. Food taking appears, thus, as a rich and suggestive field for the analysis and full understanding of ageing in relation to loneliness.

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