

Angela Thody

'With research like this, a 4* rating is just pie in the sky'
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Ever conscious of the impending RAE, everything possible must be converted to research output. Demonstrating this, Emerita Professor Angela Thody, of Lincoln University, previews her paper for the All Comers Faithfully Winterfest Conference.

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Introduction

This project investigates the characteristics of those who came to eat mince pies, when offered this traditional English Christmas sweetmeat free as an enhancement to an end-of-session, faculty, pre-Winter break social meeting. The aims were to target more accurately the potential market for such events, investigate obesity/mince pie ratios, explore consumerist discrimination concerning ageism, heightism and nationalism and attract future grants from the Bakers Federation

Establishing a relaxing atmosphere for celebrations in work settings is considered difficult (O.F.Fice and P.Artry, 1998:4). Numerous projects have trialled systems but none has yet considered a multicultural winterfest (D. Wali, 1995; E.Id, 2001; R. E. Tirement, 2004) nor has the context of this research in English 'newish' universities received any attention other than from Professor Lapping (THES every week).

Method

All faculty (academic and support) were invited, with five days' notice, to consume mince pies in two shapes, round and oblong, together with coffee. All were informed that 'mince' did not refer to meat, but to dried fruits, mixed with grated apple, carrot, suet and glace cherries between two layers of rolled and shaped mixtures of flour, fats and water, home-baked by the author (to reduce the variables of having to compare Mr Kipling and Sainsbury's own commercial varieties).

As new universities lack Senior Common Rooms (hint to VCs), a classroom was converted with paper cloth draped desks (in traditional English Christmas red and green), chairs scattered informally, an imported coffee urn and a traditional ghetto blaster for audio Winterfest music.

While circulating with pies and coffee, faculty were asked to provide details about themselves on analysis sheets attached to the walls. This public collection of data was to enhance the seasonal atmosphere; traditionally reticent faculty in British universities might be roused to converse with each other or even to exchange names

while holding each others' pies and coffee to allow pen manipulation on the wall sheets. The author also used participant observation. Future research on such occasions would be assisted by a microphone hidden in the researcher's own mince pie.

Findings

Attendance and consumption: about half the eligible faculty attended; 100% of attendees consumed at least two pies each; round pies proved the most popular (75% consumed) despite both round and oblong pies containing the same mixture and quantity.

Discrimination

- a) *Ageism*-age range was claimed at 21-92, averaging at 39.2 years. Observation appeared to indicate that a higher average would have been appropriate. Two consumers claimed to have forgotten their age. Several perceived themselves to be 'wearing out fast' or 'over the hill'. Some made competitive claims: 'younger than you' for example.
- b) *Heightism*-three were less than five feet, two claimed exactly six feet, two more looked over six feet and one was 1m 98 cms (whatever that is). The mean was somewhere between five and six feet.
- c) *Nationalism*- The English delegates were observed to consume as many mince pies as those from outside England (Jamaica, Ireland, Egypt, Japan – one each; Wales, two). The English were mainly from the southern counties but the one Yorkshire person consumed three mince pies (all oblong). One delegate came from Fairyland and one from Regents Park.

Obesity/mince pie ratio: the average from the claimed weights was 8 stone 8lbs (the researcher feels that traditional mince pies need traditional, imperial weights). Observation showed this to be unlikely as did the recorded comments, 'Don't want to know', 'Can't see the scales', 'Still dieting', 'Heavy', 'Too much'. Only one person (Welsh) claimed to be 'Just right' and the delegate from Fairyland came in as 'Lightweight'.

Conclusions

The 47.142852179% attendance rate indicates either than insufficient time is allowed for seasonal celebrations in work time, that faculty depart before vacation has formally begun or that coffee is insufficient inducement to attendance.

There was no evidence that mince-pie eating is discriminatory.

The mean perceived age was lower than that observed. Interpretation: you are as old as you feel and you may feel older at the end of term.

The average height may indicate an unjustified tendency to employ 5-6 footers in universities but further information is needed on height distribution in the populace generally and in new universities in particular.

Students are lucky to be exposed to faculty of such wide-ranging origins and of such open minds that they eat whatever is put in front of them.

Don't mess with the traditional; always serve round pies.

The open method of information collection may have affected data veracity but it greatly enhanced the jollity rating of the event. Moral: all methodologies are compromises so why miss out on the fun?

Outcomes

It is hoped that this research will shorten the long climb up the rating scales. In the meantime, research funds must be acquired somehow so the author intends to sell the more sensational of the findings from this research to the tabloid press:-

TOO EXHAUSTED FOR SEX

The overload on university staff was dramatically illustrated in a recent survey. While consuming mince pies at their university's winter party, staff were asked what sex they were. "What's sex?" asked several. Some indicated they had lost interest or had not had it recently, would like more information or had forgotten what it meant. Women seemed less affected than men; two stated they had worn out two husbands and were working on the third. The researcher, Dr Angela Thody, said she had been considering encouraging staff to increase their research outputs but is now thinking of setting up a massage parlour instead. The Dean of the Faculty was not available for comment.

References

The author would welcome some.

Acknowledgments

To ex-colleagues at the universities of Lincoln, Luton and Leicester. If you recognise yourself in the above, it's not my fault.