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SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY

On Food and Culture: A Migrant's Experience

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This article explores the importance and impact of gastronomical practices in the development of a migrant's cultural identity in a new foreign—or an "Other"—setting. I critically engage the concept of "cultural identity", emphasising the concepts of nationalism, borders, and sense of belonging. I later portray food as a symbolic resource available to migrants for the proper development of their cultural identities. I present one case in which food practices may bring two peoples together and one in which it appears to do the opposite; namely, fusion cuisine and the gentrification of food practices, respectively. Before providing my concluding thoughts, I provide personal experiences of how food practices have shaped my own migrant identity using an innovative method of autoethnography.

INTRODUCTION

Marinate the chicken pieces in Indian spices and yoghurt and roast them. While the chicken cooks, heat up some water and cook the Basmati rice. Meanwhile, prepare a thick curry sauce with pureed tomatoes, cream, coconut cream, and coriander; all brought together by the *garam masala* spice mix. Add the chicken pieces to the sauce and serve with rice and *naan* bread. This recipe is nothing but a personal interpretation of the famous Chicken Tikka Masala. Variations of the dish include lamb, fish, or cheese, making it one of the most versatile and popular international recipes. In regard to Chicken Tikka Masala, former UK Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook, stated:

> Chicken Tikka Masala is now a true British national dish, not only because it is the most popular, but because it is a perfect illustration of the way Britain absorbs and adapts external influences. Chicken Tikka is an Indian dish. The Masala sauce was added to satisfy the desire of British people to have their meat served in gravy. (Cook, 2001)

Chicken Tikka Masala was claimed by the United Kingdom as their national dish, in an attempt to emphasise the multiculturality that has characterised the country since the second half of the 20th century. However, British South Asians argue that the roots of this dish can be traced back to India, and that Chicken Tikka Masala has been subjected to a process of gentrification by the British people to compensate for the countless hate crimes and discrimination that South Asians suffered following their mass arrival in the 1950s and 1960s, through the appreciation/appropriation of their gastronomy (Buettner, 2008). While this example can be considered as a celebration of multiculturalism or a clear example of fusion cuisine, it can also be interpreted as a case of cultural appropriation through the gentrification of South Asian cultures by the British. Whichever interpretation one may find more suitable to this specific case, the sociocultural importance of food and food practices, especially in a migratory context, remains undeniable.

Gastronomy and cultural food practices are one of the many components that constitute an individual's cultural identity. Although this cultural identity may be taken for granted in one's native country, it may take a more prominent role in the context of migration. In the intensifying process of globalisation, individuals have become obsessed with finding their personal sense of belonging when living abroad (Ceuppens & Geschiere, 2005). Nonetheless, this feeling of "non-belonging" and alienation is not exclusive to global societies nowadays, as it can be argued that it was rooted in the implementation of modern borders. Indeed, McKeown (2008) argues that, during the imperial era, Western nations constructed artificial borders that satisfied their political and economic interests while making the separation of peoples and cultures the consequences of collateral damage. Borders were therefore unprecedented physical barriers that responded to the need to separate "us" from the "other", the Western from the non-Western, the civilised from the uncivilised. There is no common understanding on the formal creation of borders, as some authors argue they arose after the Peace of Westphalia, in the aftermath of the French Revolution, or during the consolidation of imperialism in the 19th century (Laine, 2015). Nonetheless, border studies gained prominence in the late 20th century, following public concerns of a "borderless" world with migratory freedom of movement (Kolossov & Scott, 2013). The tendency to see migration as something that overcomes, rather than interacts with, borders—as if human mobilisation did not exist prior to the implementation of borders—oversimplifies the identity struggles of migrants (McKeown, 2008). Following Appadurai (1990), we must reconsider the binary views of the world, embedded particularly during colonial history. Rather than understanding these issues as matters of Global North vs. Global South, East vs. West, First World vs. Third World, we must "globalise" our views and comprehend how our cultures continuously interact and overlap with one another.

This article will examine the cultural practices regarding food production and its subsequent consumption among migrants. Namely, what role(s) do food and gastronomy play in defining the cultural identity of a migrant? How can food create contact points between two seemingly independent cultures? How do new culinary traditions develop in new

contexts? In order to answer these questions, this article will first provide an analysis of what cultural identity can be to a migrant, emphasising the creation of this concept through the origins of the nation-state and the implementation of modern borders. It will later address the issue by narrowing the concept and focusing on migrant food practices, providing different examples and situations where food is employed to preserve one's cultural identity and as a means to better adapt to a new country. Before concluding, I will conduct a brief autoethnography in order to analyse my experiences with food and cultural identity as a young middle-class migrant in the Netherlands. This way, I hope to provide more insightful context to the topic under discussion.

"WHO AM I?": CULTURAL IDENTITY AND SENSE OF BELONGING IN MIGRATORY CONTEXTS

Although the many different elements that compose one's cultural identity cannot be traced back to a specific moment in history, the concept of cultural identity itself and its political utilisation can be attributed to the creation of the nation-state. However, while there is general consensus that nation-states and nationalism are worldwide phenomena, there are intense scholarly debates on the origin, meaning, and scope of these terms. For instance, some authors argue that states came into being when specific groups of people found common objective traits that led to bonds of cohesion and mutual loyalty, such as language or religion (Hazony, 2018). In opposition to this argument, authors including Renan (1996) and Yack (2012) emphasise that it is the will of the people which can build a state and the feeling of nation. On this latter point, take Switzerland: here, multilingual communities are said to have a stronger feeling of unity rather than being a nation built solely on a common language and other arbitrary objective factors. Some authors highlight the subjective factors that can form a nation, such as historian Seton-Watson (1977), who argue that a nation is created when a number of people within a community see themselves as part of a nation, behaving as if they formed one. Benedict Anderson's (1983) definition—perhaps the most influential in political anthropology—of a nation as an "imagined community" aligns with the subjective understanding of the nation, where one imagines themselves as belonging to and within a group that is, in turn, comprised of people who are largely unknown to them.

Malešević & Trošt (2018) argue that by emphasising the cultural cohesion of their populace, nation-states were founded on the base of unique and special objective characteristics that differed them from other nation-states. Importantly, the ideological structure of a nation-state conceives the idea of cultural homogeneity within its citizenship. Making the nation the unique expression of a cultural collective being emphasises the importance of nationhood on individuals, making it stand above other group allegiances (ibid.). It is important to note that some nationalist feelings may come before the creation of the nation-state, and could in fact be one of the forces that sees its reification (Kedourie, 2002). Given that the nation exists prior to the state, nationalism appeals to the shared cultural heritage of a people, highlighting their common language, economy, territory, and cultural identity (as Gellner's (1997) theory of nationalism supports)—the last of these including shared religion, ethnic descent, or collective customs such as gastronomy. Once the nationalist feeling has been established, the nation can organise itself and turn into a nation-state (Malešević & Trošt, 2018). However, with the consolidation of the nation-state came the politicisation of cultural differences, which emphasised the supremacist attributes of nationalism and was followed by the implementation of modern borders and border policies (ibid.). Here, I have given particular attention to the arguments of Malešević & Trošt (ibid.) in conversations about nations and nationalism due to their own emphasis on the importance of objective factors towards the building of the nationalist feeling. These, as will become clear, neatly complement my understanding of gastronomy and foodways.

McKeown (2008) explained how the consolidation of nation-states and borders was a consequence of a widespread retreat into protectionism, nationalism, and racism, following the insecurities and change caused by international socioeconomic interactions, from early 15th century colonialism till today. This way, the erection of border controls became a physical barrier not only to safeguard national security borders, but also to segregate the cultural macro-categories that divided the world. The division between the East and the West, between the civilised and uncivilised, was given a physical form (McKeown, 2008). Interestingly, while nation-states felt the need to protect their identity, they were also politically and economically motivated to engage in the colonial practices of the time. Nowadays, nation-states that have a history of colonial expansion can perceive their past reflected in their immigration trends and history (van Amersfoort & van Niekerk, 2006). And, while the military and economic relevance of borders has been drastically reduced in the past decades, the boundaries that they stand for are arguably stronger than ever (Andreas, 2000).

Mexican-American and feminist scholar Gloria Anzaldúa (1991) thoroughly reflected on the sociocultural impact of borders, focusing on the Texan/Mexican border through her personal experiences. Following the Mexican defeat in the U.S.-Mexican War, an artificial border was created in southern Texas, leaving 100,000 Mexicans "jerked out by the roots, truncated, disemboweled, dispossessed, and separated from [their] identity and [their] history." (Anzaldúa, 1991, p. 8). Anzaldúa understood the "borderland" as the physical space where two or more cultures edge over each other; a space where multiple races and traditions occupy the same territory. It is within this space where individuals are in a constant contention to understand their cultural identity, and the many natural and artificial elements that define it (Anzaldúa, 1991). Anzaldúa's mother's experience is of special relevance to this article. Anzaldúa stated the pride her mother felt when her recipe for *enchiladas coloradas* was included in a cookbook for Mexican women in a region on the U.S. side of the border (ibid., p. 9). While her mother's cultural identity had been divided by the imposition of the border, she was able to start building a new dual identity as a Mexican-American woman, constructed through and between her food and her new socio-geographical situation.

Appadurai (1990) refers to globalisation as the scope of interconnections across the globe in terms of people, things, and ideas. As these go over national boundaries, they continuously shift the social landscapes in which contemporary citizens find their lives embedded within (ibid.). In a highly globalised world, who belongs where? Nationalist discourses have re-emerged in order to protect the "ancestral lands" against those who might threaten the autochthonous identity of its people and culture (Ceuppens & Geschiere, 2005). As a consequence of this, contact between an immigrant with the dominant or host community can lead to a process of assimilation and deculturation, in which an individual experiences the loss of cultural identity (Bhugra & Becker, 2005). In such a process, one cultural group often dominates and "hosts" the other, thus establishing, inculcating, and regulating norms within its borders, reifying a certain Gramscian cultural hegemony (Bates, 1975). We might call this process, as does Bhugra (2004), a form of deculturation. Here, Bughra identifies five domains that can be linked to deculturation: language, religion, entertainment, food, and shopping habits (other areas are more difficult to identify, such as cognitive styles and behavioural patterns). These become a form of "sanctuary" to which migrants turn to when they feel their cultural identity is at risk. For example, the practice of one's native language abroad, the celebration of a familiar religious festivity, or the preparation of traditional dishes can become supportive tools during the process of adaptation.

Having given a particular analysis of the struggles modern migrants experience with their cultural identities and their sense of belonging, some context into the historical and more current tendencies of this phenomenon have been illuminated. I now turn to expand the idea of food and culinary practices as an element of a migrant's cultural identity.

FOOD AS A MEANS TO SALVAGE CULTURAL IDENTITY

As this article has shown, the association of food with the migrant experience is a complex one, and has become an independent field of study within anthropology. Food can be a crucial part of an individual's culture and identity. Food can also be a reflection of one's socioeconomic standing, as well as a political tool—its smells, appearance, or modes of consumption can contribute to xenophobic and racist warfare, as well as to nationalist and supremacist pride (Kershen, 2017). It has been

subject to politics of segregation, and, in some cases, forced to adapt to specific dietary traditions in regional and national contexts. Food traditions are also crucial to the practices of most religions, often offering a symbolic resource that can bind individuals to their faith (Feeley-Harnik, 1995; Bloch, 1989/2020). While it is not possible to illustrate all the vast ethnographic possibilities in this article, a more general approach to the diverse roles of food in the migrant experience will follow.

As anthropologist Lévi-Strauss stated *The Origin of Table Manners*:

> … cooking, it has never been sufficiently emphasized, is with language a truly universal form of human activity: if there is no society without a language, nor is there any which does not cook in some manner at least some of its food. (1978, p. 471)

Food and culinary tradition are as fundamental to human behaviours as language; and, in a similar fashion, food is deeply influenced by regional traditions, the past, and the present. Food practices are in no way static, as the human need for adaptation and incorporating external elements make them one of the most dynamic traits of human culture. The uniqueness of food for each individual makes it a fruitful strategy to cope with the strangeness and disorientation migrants experience in new spaces (Parasecoli, 2014). By recreating a sense of home around food production, its preparation, and posterior consumption, a personal and collective cultural sense of comfort is achieved.

Fabio Parasecoli (2014) emphasises the interaction between a migrant and "Otherness" (where this refers to the new country and society a migrant enters) in relation to food. Interestingly, he opts to reframe "Otherness" and ascribe it to the unfamiliar environment that the migrant finds themselves within as opposed to the migrant themselves. Indeed, much anthropological literature has sought to focus on the migrant "Other" as though the settled land were the given reference point. This approach, however, duly recentres the migrant and their unfamiliarity. Parasecoli's main argument is that, however unsettling an unfamiliar environment may be for a migrant, eating is an inevitable component of daily life which will force the migrant to interact physically, emotionally, and even economically, with the "Otherness" (ibid.). It is through these forced interactions that a migrant sometimes starts giving a significant and cultural meaning space to the previously threatening environment. In a way, food, in its most basic context, acts as an active agent towards the confrontation of a migrant with the "Otherness".

This idea does not thus imply that the migrant will consume local foods, but rather that the migrant will attempt an approach to the "Otherness" using hunger and the physical need for food as a pretext, even if it is to cook familiar dishes. Once migrants become familiar with the new environment, and accept that any element can potentially become part of their diet, they take a more open and non-protective approach to their food practices, though still carefully safeguarding them as a vital component of their cultural identity (Parasecoli, 2014). In Morasso and Zittoun's (2014) study of food as a means to adjust to life in London, we find a notable example of interaction between a migrant and "Otherness" via food practices. In their research, Petra, a Polish migrant, uses food to represent her willingness to adapt to the multicultural community of London, by exchanging recipes and learning dishes from other countries with her friends (Morasso & Zittoun, 2014). Looking at this practice from a broader lens, the gifting and exchange of food and culinary knowledge can be interpreted as a way to give back to the host country, as well as an excuse to celebrate the multiculturalism of migration in a sociocultural setting.

Gift giving is an intriguing universal behaviour that has fascinated anthropologists since the establishment of the discipline, and has been subject to thorough debate following Malinowski's (1922) and Mauss' (1974) discussion on the complexity of gift exchange. A social conduct based on reciprocity and exchange, gift giving entails a symbolic transaction in which objects act as mediators carrying significant cultural meaning (Sherry, Jr., 1983). As Barcellos Rezende argues (2007), food gifting follows the same general and basic rules of gifting: to give, receive, and reciprocate. However, under the context of migration, this kind of gifting entails an intimate and personal exchange that can go beyond the usual nature of the gift. Taking Parasecoli's (2014) approach to "Otherness", food gifting from migrants who find themselves in the vulnerable position of facing an unknown society carries deep value and meaning. By inviting someone home to cook for them, one opens themselves to "Otherness", and the simple process of preparing and consuming a meal becomes a cultural and social action which can be representative of such personal efforts.

As I have discussed, food is able to create an umbilical link between where one is from and where one is now. This way, recipes and dishes have travelled and crossed borders to provide new ways to perform old and new senses of home within new spaces, providing migrants with a better understanding of *who* they are now (Agyeman & Giacalone, 2020). Understanding foodways as performative acts allows for a broader comprehension of the meaning of food for a migrant: buying the ingredients at an expat store, the particular methods of preparation with the available tools, or specific traditions in the consumption of the foods all come together in a particular performance that takes place in the specific personal context of an individual's migration experience (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1999). The rediscovery, protection, and promotion of one's own food practices provides a shared sense of belonging to migrant communities, found in the material culture that unites them (Parasecoli, 2014). Nonetheless, it is also of great interest to analyse how these cultural communities can open themselves to interact with the local community. When "locals" are allowed to participate, and the label of *outsider* is not used by any of the two parties to alienate either group, food can act as the perfect adhesive between two peoples, two cultures.

Uniting two peoples, two cultures: fusion cuisine

For this section, I will focus solely on fusion cuisine that derived from the contact between two cultures under the context of migration. While numerous culinary practices emerged from the colonial era, and also served as a means to bring coloniser and colonised together, this fusion can be considered to be forced and directly resulting from the colonial period. Therefore, although Filipino cuisine can be considered as one of the best examples of fusion cuisine, its Spanish-American heritage excludes it from this analysis. What is of most interest is the postcolonial cohesion between two cultures through culinary practices.

There are innumerable examples of this postcolonial union through food: Tex-Mex cuisine, American-Chinese cuisine, or Anglo-Indian cuisine (which emerged in the United Kingdom following massive flows of South Asian migration in the mid-20th century), to name a few. While the mentioned cases can be traced back to a clear colonial or violent past (e.g., Mexican-American War, British Raj), I argue that the fusion of their gastronomic cultures takes place in the aftermath of colonialism. Therefore, even if a direct cause of a colonial past, the examples provided took shape under the context of modern migration. A personal favourite example of fusion cuisine is *tacos al pastor*. Considered one of the most popular dishes worldwide, and the undisputed flag bearer of Mexican cuisine, it originated following the arrival of Lebanese migrants in the early 20th century,[1] who, when attempting to recreate Lebanese *shawarma*, combined their heritage with Mexican cuisine and created the modern version of *tacos al pastor* (García Garza, 2011).

One of the best examples of migrant-originated fusion cuisine can be found in Peru, in Nikkei gastronomy. As described by Takenaka, "Nikkei food symbolizes the perfect harmony between the Japanese and Peruvian cultures; it is not Japanese food with Peruvian ingredients, nor Peruvian food with Japanese ingredients, it is the result of a unique cultural mixture" (2017, p. 125). When they first arrived in Peru, Japanese migrants were highly discriminated against in terms of socioeconomic standing and race. During the decades following their establishment in their new home, Nikkei Peruvians struggled with their identity, as they felt neither Japanese nor Peruvian enough. However, as the second generation of migrants developed, they were able to start finding their sense of belonging and integrating themselves in Peruvian society, where Nikkei cuisine played a crucial role (Takenaka, 2017).

The gentrification of ethnic foods

Gentrification can be understood as the conversion of marginalised

and working-class communities of the central areas of a city for middle class and privileged residential use (Zukin, 1987). While there is no clear consensus on the understanding of "gentrification", I take Zukin's approach to develop my following argument. If we extrapolate this concept into this article's subject matter, gentrification invites cultural appropriation of "authentic" and "ethnic" foods, which can become exoticised and appropriated by the dominant culture of the host country (Agyeman & Giacalone, 2020). Ceuppens and Geschiere (2005) argue that a great majority of the Western population, especially in the last decades of the 20th century, thought of "indigenous peoples" (even if living in the same city) as "Others" whose cultures were weak entities that could only survive if awarded special protection. This paternalistic approach could be interpreted as a Western defence to one's national identity, under threat by the arrival of migrants with distinctive cultural traditions, including gastronomy.

Agyeman and Giacalone (2020) argue that Whiteness has provided alternative food concepts of "local" or "health" that negate Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities and heritage. As mentioned before, ethnic food has been employed as a political and xenophobic tool. It smells and looks different, and it can be consumed in many different ways. To narrow this idea to a specific example, let us focus on the example of Anglo-Indian migration in the United Kingdom and Chicken Tikka Masala. South Asian migrants in the UK have reportedly experienced xenophobic and racist discrimination on the basis of their food practices back in the 20th century (Buettner, 2008). The spices they use may have caused an "unpleasant" odour to the average British citizen, and the fact that they sometimes used their hands to eat could be "unsettling". However, a few decades later, South Asian second and third-generation migrants were experiencing the whitewashing of their identity. Not only were they heavily discriminated against on the basis of their food practices; now it had been institutionally "appropriated" by the British with Chicken Tikka Masala, disguised as a celebration of multiculturalism.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES WITH FOOD: THE AUTHOR'S AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

In an attempt to explore food in contemporary migration between Australia and the United Kingdom, scholars Christine Knight and Jessica Shipman (2021) used the method of co-constructed autoethnography, or "duoethnography". Given the singularity of every migrant's journey, I find here an opportunity to share my own personal experiences, suitable in contributing to the contemporary understanding of food, belonging, and diversity in the migration experience. In order to do so, I will briefly reflect on my time as a young White middle-class Spanish expatriate in the Netherlands.

I, Pablo Bernardo López Basurco, was born in Madrid to Spanish parents, where I have lived my whole life up until 2021. In August 2021, I moved to Utrecht, the Netherlands, to pursue an undergraduate degree in Liberal Arts & Sciences, with a focus on anthropology and international relations. During my upbringing in Spain, I was not as aware of my national and cultural identity as I am now. While this identity has not been constructed abroad, the circumstances I have been exposed to have favoured its revelation. My reflections on my personal experiences will provide another unique understanding of food and cultural identity in a migratory context.

Back in 2021, during my first academic year in Utrecht, I did not give much importance to food. My food practices were reduced to my survival, as I did not feel like food could provide me with a special sense of belonging, which, back then, I did not feel like I was in need of. Facing the "Otherness" that Parasecoli (2014) described was not a personal issue, as I had found my "home" in two of my best friends: Olivia, an Argentinian senior student, and Andrés, a Mexican freshman;[2] I was therefore not alone when "facing" the Dutch or the Netherlands. During our time together, we really emphasised our own personal cultural identities, benefiting from their Hispanic similarities and amused by their unique differences and traits. Even though food did not play a primary role in our relationship, it did act at times as an excuse to get us, and other friends, together. I organised several dinners where my *tortilla española* was the main dish, in which I took great pride. On different occasions, we baked Argentinian *alfajores*, or cooked Mexican *sopa de tortilla*. Similar to the descriptions offered by Morasso and Zittoun (2014), I experienced the sharing of our own national dishes as a celebration of multiculturalism, and I can think of specific moments and people with whom I developed a great relationship, particularly when attending to my food. While food practices were not pivotal to my identity and sense of belonging during my first academic year, they were indeed a component of a broader personal culture.

However, everything changed back in September 2022, when neither Olivia nor Andrés returned to university. While Olivia did stay in the city of Utrecht, Andrés dropped out and went back home to Mexico. Suddenly, the Netherlands did not feel like the home it had been for me just a few months back. Now, I had to face the "Otherness" on my own, and whilst my personal identity within the university was not shattered, it was deeply affected. These two people were my day and night for a year, and I was now "alone". Suddenly, in September, I felt like starting to cook more elaborate dishes in comparison to last year. I called one of my culinarily-talented aunts, asking for advice on Spanish recipes that I could easily recreate in the Netherlands on a student budget. I quickly took pleasure in cooking these dishes, and I weirdly felt more connected to my "Spanishness", my broader cultural identity. Although these dishes reminded me of home, I had not actually eaten some of them at all in the past. Even if some did not transport me back to my family or my home, I felt more connected to my roots: I was bringing a piece of my home, Spain, to the Netherlands. I started sharing everything I cooked with my friends and, without pretending it, food quickly became again an excuse to meet up with other people and celebrate multiculturalism.

CONCLUSION

Every individual migrant carries a complex and unique cultural baggage that creates an intimate link between where one is from and where one is now. This baggage can provide a sense of belonging when one needs it most, or it can be employed as a tool to facilitate integration in a new space. It can take the form of language, religious practices, entertainment, humour, music, clothing, hairstyle, habits, dances, and, of course, food (although this is certainly not an exhaustive list). Food provides the perfect stage for the performance of transcultural identities, as it is a fundamental element in our lives which we have to engage with on a daily basis. Food is not unique and static; it often is converged and explored with other cultures. Contrary to the idea of borders, food can be often imagined not as a physical separation of two peoples, of two cultures, but as a space of interaction between these two entities. While the study of food practices is a much broader field, and there is extensive literature on the topic, supported by various and diverse specific case studies, this article has sought to provide a more general overview of the impact of food in the migratory context. Namely, food can act as a component of one's cultural identity; it can be a means to find one's sense of belonging when facing the "Otherness" of a new country; it can be the perfect excuse to bring people together and learn from each other; or it can be the pretext to create a community of culturally-alike people in need of comfort. Referring back to Lévi-Strauss' quote, I would like to, on this final note, emphasise the power of cooking and food as a universal language that can facilitate the understanding and cultural enmeshment of diverse peoples and cultures, especially in a time of globalisation and continuous sociocultural exchange.

NOTES

1. Lebanese migration to Mexico took place primarily during the last two decades of the 19th century and the 20th century, following Ottoman repression of Lebanese Christians through forced famines and difficulties to commerce (Alfaro-Velcamp, 2006).
2. In the interests of maintaining anonymity, Olivia and Andrés are pseudonyms.

Interdisciplinary Commentary

PSYCHOLOGICAL & BEHAVIOURAL SCIENCES

You are what you eat? The macropsychology of food choices

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Food is an important part of life as a human being, because its extraction and preparation involves significant labour and time. This commentary discusses three macro-scale influences on food choices: *political conflicts*, *policy regulations*, and *geographical availability of agricultural terrain*. These in turn will be related to psychological investigations on outcomes for individuals, and to policy interventions to promote more sustainable food choices.

Introduction

Food is intrinsic and necessary to humans for physical sustenance, and its cultivation and preparation can be used to carve out an identity and a place in society on an individual, as well as collective, level (Kreklau, 2017). The extraction of food has taken many forms across the centuries and continents of the planet, for example by foraging, hunting, agriculture, and pastoralism. The historiography of food can be used to map changes and continuities in human behaviours and preferences over time, which reflect the tension between societal influence and individual preferences. Food is often imbued with cultural, religious, and moral values, which dictate customs around consumption of foods and liquids; for example, mussels in Italy were initially perceived to be disgusting, before being marketed into the status of a delicacy (Vianello, 2017). These values can be studied cross-culturally on large scales to identify patterns, and to map changes in customs and preferences which may go beyond bodily needs and sensory palatability.

This commentary does not include an exhaustive list of influences on food choices, but will focus on 3 macro-scale influences on food choices, and how these in turn can affect psychological outcomes. Namely, (1) *political conflicts*, (2) *policy regulations*, (3) *geographical availability of agricultural terrain*.

Political conflicts

The history of humankind is filled with events of conflict and warfare, and food restrictions are an unfortunate, but often a necessary side-effect for the parties involved (i.e., domestic rationing). However, more extreme forms of food restrictions have been purposefully inflicted on occupied or enemy territories. For example, the Dutch Famine of 1944 was caused by the occupation of an area in Holland by the Nazis, which resulted in over 18,000 deaths by starvation (Roseboom et al., 2006). Psychologists Roseboom and colleagues (ibid.) were able to investigate the effect of poor maternal nutrition on infant outcomes in a cohort of over 2,000 individuals born around the time of the Dutch famine. They found that the effects of famine on offspring health outcomes were related to the timing of exposure relative to gestation, whereby exposure during early gestation was associated with the most severe health outcomes (ibid.).

Contrastingly, another study by Stanner and Yudkin (2001) was conducted on survivors of the Leningrad (modern-day St. Petersburg) Siege, which similarly investigated the effects of insufficient maternal nutrition and risk factors for coronary heart disease (CHD) in offspring. They compared 196 individuals exposed to gestational starvation during the siege, 192 individuals born in Leningrad before the siege, and 188 control individuals born concurrently with the other two groups, outside the area of the siege. The researchers found no association between intrauterine starvation and risk factors for CHD, except for some non-systematic differences in diastolic blood pressure and clotting factors (ibid.). The difference in findings between the two studies may be explained by the *thrifty phenotype hypothesis* (Roseboom et al., 2006; Stanner & Yudkin, 2001), where a mismatch between the intrauterine and extrauterine conditions can result in maladaptation to the environmental conditions. The Dutch Famine lasted under a year, whereas the Leningrad Siege lasted from 1941–1944; thus, conditions of starvation in the Dutch example were more likely to lead to a mismatched situation between gestation and infancy. The mechanisms which were necessary for survival during famines may prove maladaptive in periods with adequate food access.

Policy regulations

While political conflicts tend to reactively change food availability (usually a decrease), policy regulations can proactively change food availability, and influence the nutritional choices of people. For example, Pell and colleagues (2021) investigated the effect of an intervention carried out in the United Kingdom in 2018, which introduced a two-tier tax on soft drinks according to their sugar level. The low tier targeted soft drinks with sugar concentration of ≥5 g to <8 g sugar/100 mL, whereas the high tier targeted those with ≥8 g sugar/100 mL. The taxes of £0.18/L and £0.24/L (respectively for the tiers) were collectively found to have no effect on the volume of soft drinks sold, but the sugar content in the drinks were 10% lower per household per week (ibid.). This suggests that people are sensitive to price changes in food items, and regulations in the food industry can encourage people to consume the foods they find palatable in more adequate quantities.

Research indicates that individuals tend to accept the default option as a heuristic for decision-making; and thus, interventions can be designed to encourage people's dietary choices by reducing friction and increasing the variety of meals available. For example, an experimental field study conducted in 3 Cambridge college cafeterias measured the effect of doubling the proportion of vegetarian meals available to students (Garnett et al., 2019) on over 94,000 meal purchases. The new configuration of 2 vegetarian meals out of 4 options of food resulted in proportional increases in vegetarian meal consumption by 61.8%, 78.8%, and 40.8%, respectively for each college, with the largest effects observed in individuals with the lowest prior levels of vegetarian food selection (ibid.). The effect observed was not accompanied by decreased overall sales or rebound effects (more meat consumption at other meal times), over several months. The increase in vegetarian meal consumption can be an important policy regulation area, because food consumption patterns in Western, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic countries (so-called WEIRD countries; Henrich et al., 2010)—especially in the United States—result in a disproportional environmental impact.

Geographical availability of agricultural terrain

The types of food that people can nurture in their geographical areas require different types of skills, which in turn are associated with different personality traits. For example, inhabitants living or originating from labour-intensive paddy rice-growing areas in China appear to think more holistically and to be more interdependent, regardless of actual participation in agricultural work (Talhelm, 2020; Talhelm et al., 2014). This finding is mirrored in how Turkish farmers were found to be more holistic-thinking than non-farmers (Uskul & Over, 2017). On the other hand, individuals from wheat-growing areas appear to be more independent thinking, and to be more analytical in comparison (Talhelm et al., 2014). People that deal predominantly with animals show a slightly different personality profile; Japanese fishers appear to have higher self-esteem and more independence than farmers (Uchida et al., 2019); meanwhile, Arab herders are said to be more holistic thinking, but

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also more assertive in order to keep track of their easy-to-steal livestock (Talhelm et al., 2020).

Findings such as these have supported the *"collective activity" hypothesis* (Uchida et al., 2019), whereby the frequency and prevalence of collective activities, such as farming, influence the extent to which people are interdependent. Thus, in geographical areas where grains that require a lot cooperation and nurture are grown (i.e., rice paddies), having a good reputation (i.e., *social capital*; Pretty, 2003) is more important, because it facilitates neighbours' cooperation.

Conclusion

This commentary discussed three factors which influence the choices individuals make when they decide to consume food. Political conflicts tend to reduce the availability of food, and can have especially adverse health effects for neonates. Policy regulations and interventions can guide individuals to make more sustainable and healthy food choices. The geographical terrain influences the type of subsistence practices people can undertake, and the cultivation process has been associated with cognitive styles and personality traits.

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