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CHAPTER 6

Feeding Variety: Challenging the Standard American Diet through Nutrition Education

Ayla Samli

Introduction

Although anthropologists, such as Mary Douglas (2003) and Sidney Mintz (1986), have looked into the ritual significance of food and food preparation over time and in great depth, the Standard American Diet has not been as compelling a subject of study, despite its sociocultural significance. Compared to feasts in Papua New Guinea and the whithertos and wherefores of pork proscriptions among the ancient Jews, the Standard American Diet (SAD) is a newer dietary creation, one that pervades everyday life, a mundane staple of nutrition in the United States. This paper will not investigate the Standard American Diet in detail. Instead, it will consider the features of nutrition interventions for school-aged children and adult refugees.

The paper's findings are drawn from observations and anecdotal data from Recipe for Success, a nutrition education program funded by a grant from the US Department of Agriculture's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program–Education (SNAP-Ed) and the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services and housed in the Anthropology department of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Because my previous research focused on how gender functions in Istanbul households, this speculative project on nutrition in the United States is a departure from my expertise; so this paper is preliminary, theoretical, and reflexive. I recognize that the anthropology of food has a long history, and this paper will not address that in detail; however, it draws on my own humanistic orientation to culture. Coming to a new research topic from a different set of disciplinary questions entails looking awry at the field, reaping both the risks and benefits of naiveté and unconventionality. Different orientations keep our discipline dynamic. Like food sampling, I appreciate the opportunity to try something new and unfamiliar.

The Standard American Diet finds its origins in industrialization, which created a cascade of lifestyle changes for Americans participating in industrial labor, who began to rely on different modes of transport, work, and packaged foods. Wiedman (2012) details the health effects of industrialization on Native Americans beginning in the 1940s and throughout the subsequent decades. As working Native Americans adopted a SAD diet, they also suffered from its far-reaching health effects, including increased cholesterol, heart disease, and diabetes. But this diet not only impacts the bodies that consume it—the SAD also impacts consumption. In her book *Dangerous Digestion*, Melanie DePuis (2015) suggests that the Standard American Diet also informs cultural values surrounding food and food nutrition and that the embrace of the SAD results in the shutting down of other food options. She states: "Understanding S. A. D. also requires knowing the ways in which the cheap meat-centered diet stigmatized fiber-filled diets of other Americans—the greens and beans eating cultures of China, Mexico, and the black and white South" (100). So, the SAD, gaining status over local, traditional foods, has suppressed and overtaken nutritious, indigenous eating habits. Over time, SAD food has become more accessible and affordable than traditional foods.

The Standard American Diet exists within a whole culture of consuming cheap resources, as DuPuis details in the following statement: "Cheap food fits into a larger American bargain among industry (cheap wages), workers (cheap food), and the middle class (moral superiority), enabling each to fill a role and to gain advantages from that role" (2015, 99). Thus, the Standard American Diet functions within a political economy of labor and industry, making it much bigger than food. Food inequity relates to this political economic system, and it has been reinforced by the "food revolution" focused on healthful eating. Healthful food has become more expensive as cheaper food has become more widely available. DuPuis analyzes bifurcation of food access according to socioeconomic status. "As cheap food becomes even more industrialized and processed, the poor are eating more of it while those who have the means avoid it. The poor are then blamed for their faulty lifestyles, leading to new policies to control the consumption of those at fault" (DePuis 2015, 99). When nutritious foods are replaced with calorie-dense ones, the health effects are far reaching (Grotto and Zied 2010).

Although the impulse might be to consider SAD out in society through its many iterations in media and marketing, how the SAD is perpetuated through households where it might be challenged through nutritious alternatives deserves investigation. Perhaps a corollary to SAD is the category of whiteness—it is that unmarked, taken-for-granted category against which all others are measured. In the book *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, George Lipsitz identifies whiteness "as the unmarked category against which difference is constructed, whiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its rule as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations" (2006, 1). The Standard American Diet sets the standard against which other diets are measured; it is comfort food and fast food, thus rendering vegetable-based diets less homey. As the place where comfort is created, home is, by nature, ethnocentric—because home meals come out of parents' eating habits and conceptions of food. If we want to combat the invisible hegemony, or the ethnocentrism, of the Standard American Diet we have to explore food outside of the home.

Many of us can think back on our childhood meals as a perpetuation of certain signature dishes, values, and tastes. My partner mentioned that one of his father's favorite dishes in rotation was Roman Holiday (which is basically homemade hamburger helper), while I remember many, many servings of turkey tetrazzini (a turkey and cheese casserole). These comfort foods did not make vegetables the focus. As a middle-class parent today, I have visited many US homes where children are offered separate meals of SAD food compared to their parents or older siblings—especially pasta or grilled cheese and chicken fingers. In the study "Eating Fruits and Vegetables: An Ethnographic Study of American and French Family Dinners," the authors note that working parents of both cultures who live busy lives certainly feed their children prepared foods and maintain control over how, when, and what they eat (Kremer-Sadlik et al. 2015). The authors suggest that their "observations also afford insights into parents' beliefs about what children should eat, and into parents' talk and behavior patterns that socialize children into certain eating habits . . ." (85). This quote reveals that mealtimes serve as opportunities for the inculcation of values, socialization of tastes, and a chance to perpetuate cultural norms and familial habits related to food. The ethnographic study, comparing American with French children's food sampling habits, shows that French children are offered a variety of vegetables at meal times, through courses, that they usually taste a bite, and that they are not provided with alternative foods. Although it might be appealing to tell Americans to simply emulate French dining habits for the sake of their children's future palettes and health, that is not happening; so what other kinds of eating environments can Americans create?

Nutrition Education for American Schoolchildren

Recipe for Success, operating out of UNC Greensboro's Anthropology department, offers nutrition education to SNAP-eligible populations, which includes some Title 1 schools. Although the explicit goal of Recipe for Success is to increase intake of fruits and vegetables, the goal depends on developing awareness of a diversity of fruits and vegetables, of nurturing a taste for them, and learning how they might be incorporated into daily life.

I will now present some vignettes and observations about the sampling environments that foster experimentation and openness to foods. Recipe for Success presents children with various opportunities for food sampling. Recipe for Success educators typically offer a lesson related to the food (such as the importance of eating colorful fruits and vegetables), followed by a food tasting. In smaller classes, children—who are usually elementary aged—are invited to help prepare the food that they sample. The following describes aspects of the sampling atmospheres, which might be useful in considering how to frame exploring unfamiliar foods.

1. *There's no place like home*

Recipe for Success uses libraries, schools, and community recreation centers for nutrition education, places that are clearly outside of the home. This "not-homeness" calls on different roles of engagement for children and food, allowing them to break with prejudices against foods. One example my former colleague Kimberly Titlebaum provided was when a little boy helped her to cut and prepare tuna salad with celery and apples. Although he had refused to eat tuna salad at home, he ate it during the food sampling, with some trepidation. This observation illustrates that eating outside of the home can be perceived as a threat to the order established by home life. The child's grandmother later claimed that he now prepares this special dish for his family on a regular basis. As a point of convergence, when I conducted research on domestic life in Turkey, many of the housewives I interviewed warned me against the perils of eating outside of the house in cafes or restaurants, because it might be dangerous and I would not know who was cooking the food. These warnings struck me as indicators of how highly threatening (and potentially promising) dining out might be in terms of disrupting the norms (both gender and food related) of home. Although grabbing a bite to eat elsewhere is customary in American society, I submit that it can also offer a dangerous, transgressive opportunity for children to sample and expand their palettes. For American children, taking risks with new foods might be easier outside of the home than within the home itself.

2. *The Tone of Exploration*

In the school classrooms I have visited, food sampling is met with openness and curiosity—perhaps because classroom teacher and nutrition educators have also set up a standard of behavior where all students try all of the foods offered. Setting up the sampling as an expected behavior allows all of the children to try the foods as a group. This could perhaps be explained through a Goffman-esque analysis of students' acting in their perceived roles, which in this case is to try new food. As an obligation and a learning expectation, food sampling becomes part of the students' responsibility in fulfilling their expected roles. When trying new foods functions as part of a student's daily work, the task shifts how the student perceives the experience of sampling. Students do not often have the luxury of turning down teachers' assignments, so food tasting becomes another assignment for the day. In some of the classrooms I visited the students met these new foods with excitement and enthusiasm.

3. *Transgressive Treats*

Many of the foods children have sampled in my presence transgress their everyday norms and expectations of foods. For example, in a class on fruit and vegetable subgroups, we gave students kale chips. Additionally, red and yellow bell peppers cut into scoops to dip hummus and guacamole serve as crunchy alternatives to potato chips. A number of children dispensed with dipping the sample spread and begged for more peppers. Again, the form of the food—serving as a dipper instead of on a salad or stuffed—might hold more interest for students who might have encountered it in different contexts. In these samplings, vegetables take on the leading roles and are met with enthusiasm. All of these foods are presented in a defamiliarized manner, out of the home context and often using textures and flavors that are either unfamiliar or defamiliarized to the students. Victor Shklovsky discussed the defamiliarization of words through poetry: "The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged" (Shklovsky 2016, 16). Similar to poetry that presents words in new contexts—foods, in these sampling contexts, standing alone or in concert with other foods in an unconventional manner, make foods stand out and remove them from their familiar stereotypes. This experience of foods creates the opportunity for new tastes, new perceptions.

4. *Diversity: Eating Rainbows*

At the public schools where Recipe for Success provides nutrition classes, the classrooms themselves are culturally diverse, so students sometimes bring into the class their own experiences with foods, serving as ambassadors to some of the food sampled. Guacamole, succotash, or beets might be staples in some households and completely foreign in others. However, in an environment that encourages exploration and some excitement, students can bring their familiarity with foods to the communal table. Students growing up on farms, for example, sometimes recognize succotash as a summer staple at home, while some students bring their familiarity with hummus to the classroom table. Leveraging students' own diverse food tastes to promote tastings helps to leverage the diversity within the classroom. At the end of the day, commensality, the act of sharing food together, experiencing exciting and diverse flavors among children who come from diverse backgrounds, helps to do the work to create nutrition awareness—and awareness of one another. Diverse food is critical for fighting nutritional deficiencies brought on by SAD—and for fighting ethnocentrism.

Thinking Diversely: When the Standard American Diet is Not the Standard

During the summer of 2017, Maurine Crouch (a former colleague from Recipe for Success and current Master's candidate in Public Health) and I developed a collaboration with a local nonprofit that serves newly arrived refugees, including adults and children, from several war-torn areas. The barriers to providing these adults with nutrition education were significant: their English was limited; their dietary habits and customs were very diverse; and navigating federal assistance programs such as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) was unfamiliar.

Culturally Inflected Challenges to Nutrition Education

Attempting to develop nutrition education for these underserved populations was quite challenging. Drawing on the resources available through SNAP-Ed, my colleagues and I conducted a lesson regarding reading nutrition labels. Through translators, various refugee groups investigated the sugar and salt content of different foods, including potato chips and sugary carbonated drinks. In addition to working on food literacy, we conducted a tasting of WIC-eligible foods. These tastings included several cereals, dairy milk, and milk alternatives. Because cereal is one of the foods available through WIC but not necessarily a staple for different populations, tastings allowed the refugees to encounter these foods and see their varied uses. Cereal can be served with milk, eaten dry as a snack, or even used as breading on other foods. Helping the refugees to both sample and consider the possibilities of the foods might make the foods more useable.

In terms of dairy milk, the director of the institute emphasized to me that dairy milk is a problem for many Asian refugee groups. Not only is it not a standard beverage for their diets but there is evidence that Asians tend to be more lactose intolerant than other populations (Swagerty et al. 2002). Dairy milk alternatives are available through WIC, so the Recipe for Success workers conducted tastings of soymilk and cow's milk, with and without cereal. These tastings presented refugees with alternatives to their familiar breakfasts but also presented these alternatives in different use contexts. Cereals could be mixed with nuts and eaten dry or served with yogurt for lunch. In other words, expecting them to assimilate American eating habits was not viable, but helping them to consider how to incorporate these available foods seemed to be a more persuasive approach. The director of the program stated that refugees needed assistance navigating WIC and SNAP, learning which foods were and were not eligible, and incorporating those foods into their habits. However, my observations suggest that the supplemental nutrition programs themselves are limited and ethnocentric.

If certain populations traditionally eat white rice for three meals a day, for example, then the allocations of cereal (presumably breakfast), whole grain bread (presumably lunch), and brown rice (dinner) do not meet the needs of those populations. It may be reasonable to help them to taste brown rice as an alternative to white rice; however, the guidelines for how much and what may be bought using WIC assumes that several grains are being eaten during different mealtimes.

In terms of dairy, if certain populations are lactose intolerant or do not consume cereal with milk, cheese, or yogurts, then the allocations of both dairy and cereals do not take into consideration the habits and limitations of those ethnic groups. Sampling dairy alternatives provides the refugees with the opportunity to encounter the foods available to them; however, incorporating those foods into a daily routine may be a long process. Whether the provided alternatives are healthier than the indigenous foods being replaced warrants further investigation.

As a cultural anthropologist who was working as a nutrition educator, I felt a disconnect between my job and my deeply-held ethical commitments. I wanted the refugees to eat and to succeed in North American society, but I was not convinced that the foods they were being allocated were healthier than the foods to which they were accustomed. In order to benefit from SNAP and WIC, refugees would have to assimilate to what was effectively a SAD breakfast and lunch. Helping them to navigate their limited choices was one form of help I could offer. However, I see the effects of SAD assimilation in my own family.

A First-Generation American Considers the SAD Reality

My father, an immigrant from Turkey, has told me, many times, the story of his arrival in the United States. When he arrived in the 1950s as an immigrant, his funds were very limited. He was able to afford one meal a day, and so he subsisted on one hamburger and a mug of warm milk and honey. To give up a cuisine of fresh fruit and vegetables at every meal to embrace one of processed food as his entire day's diet was necessary for his survival. This transition was also a part of his assimilation to the United States; he embraced the language, the food, and the orientation to work. He thrived professionally, and his health suffered from all of the poor outcomes precipitated by the SAD he embraced.

However, there is more plurality and more recognition of diversity in the United States today, and immigrants bring with them valued knowledge about their culinary traditions. The diet he left behind, the Mediterranean diet, is currently ranked as the number one best diet by *U.S. News and World Report* (2018) for its diabetes and cancer prevention capabilities. As the child of an immigrant, I connect with the flavors and traditions of my father's homeland and consider it part of my inheritance. I have had the privilege of studying the culture my father left behind, learning to cook the foods of my heritage by sneaking into the kitchen of an Istanbul restaurant and visiting my Turkish family still living there. I hope that newly arrived refugees and immigrants will have the opportunity to experience, recreate, and remember their families' foods. If they are subsisting solely on WIC-provided resources, they will have to give up many of those traditions until they find the monetary and culinary resources to once again eat their cultural foods.

Feeding the Future

During the summer, the nonprofit institute provided an array of programmed activities for the refugees' children who were out of school. These children ranged in age from about five to sixteen, and their English fluency varied immensely. As the parents took

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English classes, my Recipe for Success colleagues and I organized many of the same activities for the refugee children that we usually present to schoolchildren in local Title 1 schools. However, because the refugee students lack the English proficiency to perform the activities, the exercises served the dual purpose of talking about nutrition and teaching English. We brainstormed "rainbows of foods," locating green and red fruits and vegetables. I heard "avocado" over and over, enthusiastically, because it was an already familiar and favored food. Unlike the Title 1 English-speaking schoolchildren we usually encountered, the children of refugees and immigrants had more prior knowledge of fruits and vegetables; however, some of the local vegetables and fruits were not as familiar or looked different from their native ones. Strawberries, for example, were a new summer favorite. As my colleagues and I worked to provide sampling opportunities of different kinds of foods while developing the vocabularies of tastes—adding salt and sugar to oranges, for example, to highlight the words *sweet* and *salty*—learning was happening. The children were developing an appreciation of different foods in different contexts, learning the lexicon of words associated with fruits and vegetables, practicing English with one another, and developing confidence as speakers. However, the refugee children were also being indoctrinated into a diet more easily supported by the resources available to their newly-arrived families.

I can imagine nutrition classes where newly arrived refugees and immigrants participate alongside of their Title 1 counterparts to explore, sample, and enjoy exciting and healthy flavors and possibilities from an array of cultural backgrounds. Traditional diets are developing a greater presence in nutrition education. Resources such as Oldways (http://oldwayspt.org/traditional-diets) introduce several culturally-inflected diets to everyday audiences. Because the health, environmental, and cultural costs of suppressing indigenous diets are so pronounced, now is a good time to cultivate even more awareness of alternatives to the Standard American Diet. Those alternative foods also need to be made more available through supplemental nutrition and nutrition education programs. The future of feeding diversity entails making space for diversity in food policy and nutrition instruction by drawing on the knowledge of cultural groups and creating flexibility for WIC-approved items. Feeding diversity also depends on an awareness of structural ethnocentrism, which can be as invisible as whiteness.

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