VOICES FROM THE TABLE

Student Author

Abigail Maurer is a 2013 agricultural communication graduate of Purdue University. Maurer began looking into the cultural ramifications of food insecurity during her junior year of college when she assisted Dr. Abigail Borron with her doctoral thesis. While at Purdue, Maurer maintained the social media sites for the Brian Lamb School of Communication, assisted in the agricultural communication program, and served on the leadership committee of Reformed University Fellowship. Maurer plans on working in the agricultural industry following graduation before beginning a freelance career in writing.

Abstract

Food insecurity rates continue to rise in the United States, which creates a greater disparity between those who are food secure and those who are food insecure. Existing literature indicates that such a disparity is affected directly and indirectly through cultural, socioeconomic, and geographic factors.

The objectives of this project were designed to place culture as a central construct for understanding food insecurity and security. The objectives include (1) identifying common attitudes, beliefs, values, and patterns of participants' food culture, whether food insecure or secure; (2) gaining a deeper understanding of the unique cultures that exist within food secure and food insecure audiences; and (3) formulating guiding questions for future research in the area of food culture and food insecurity. Using methods in ethnography and grounded theory, the collective voices of each audience were captured and observed with the purpose of understanding and differentiating the various cultures at play.

The interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed, resulting in three themes emerging from the data. These themes indicate that the food insecure often encounter problems pertaining to food acquisition that arise from geographic situations and personal habits. The project highlighted how the food secure and the food insecure share similar challenges, but how they cope with the challenges in different ways.

Maurer, A. (2013). Voices from the table: Assessing the dynamic cultures of the food insecure and the food secure. *Journal of Purdue Undergraduate Research*, 3, 58–63. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5703/jpur.03.1.09>

Keywords

ethnography, culture, cultural understanding, food insecurity, grounded theory

Mentor

Abigail Borron is an assistant professor of agricultural communication in the Department of Youth Development and Agricultural Education. Her research focuses on culture-centered communication with emphases in marginalized audiences and university engagement. Inducted as an associated member of the Purdue University Teaching Academy in 2012, Borron teaches courses on interactive web strategies and oral communication in science and agriculture. Borron received her bachelor's degree in English from Indiana University-Purdue University of Fort Wayne, and her master's degree and doctorate in agricultural communication from Purdue University.

Abigail Maurer, Agricultural Communication

INTRODUCTION

How does culture shape food choices? As observed during World War II, particular food habits became a way of helping the war effort and sustaining a certain lifestyle. Victory gardens, rationing, and making do with less became three ways the food culture adapted to the war. Through these changes, consumers were able to support the war effort. A more recent example is the fair-trade and organic phenomena. As people are more concerned with how their food is produced, they are seeking out practices that align with their values and beliefs.

This study seeks to examine, compare, and understand the relationship between food and cultures among two distinct societal groups, the food secure and the food insecure. As food insecurity rates continue to rise (Coleman-Jensen, Nord, Andrews, & Carlson, 2010), there is a need to gain a deeper cultural understanding of patterns pertaining to food and the overall lived experiences of those who are food secure and insecure (Borron, 2012).

Figure 1. According to the United States Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service, 14.5% of U.S. households in the United States were food insecure.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Food Security versus Food Insecurity

The World Health Organization (WHO) holds that food security is built on three pillars: food availability, food access, and food use (2012). People should have sufficient quantities of food available on a consistent basis, have sufficient resources to obtain appropriate foods for a nutritious diet, and understand how to appropriately use food based on knowledge of basic nutrition and care, as well as adequate water and sanitation (WHO, 2012). A 2010 report from the United States Department of Agriculture and Economic Research Service found that 14.5% of U.S. households were food insecure (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2010) (Figure 1).

From 1998 to 2010, the number of food insecure households with children increased from 17.6% to 20.2% (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2010). In 2010, 35.1% of households headed by single women and 25.1% of black households were food insecure (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2010).

Between 2008 and 2010, 13% of Indiana households were classified as food insecure, and 5.4% were classified as having very low food security (USDA, 2012). This is an increase from the 2002–2004 statistics that cited food insecurity in Indiana as 10.1% and very low food insecurity as 3.6%.

Food Through a Cultural Lens

Previous studies examining food through a cultural lens have indicated that there is a relationship between an individual's food habits and the environment of the individual. Making the decision to eat healthy is significantly affected by the intersection between

consumers' preferences, nutrition literacy, and the food culture of the place of residence (Jetter & Cassady, 2006). Issues pertaining to transportation to a grocery store, as well as social and/or cultural barriers, impact the willingness of individuals to access the various resources available to them (Morton, Bitto, Oakland, & Sand, 2008). Studies indicate that food is tied to a specific identity held by a community and an individual. An opportunity therefore exists within communities and the lives of individuals to examine food insecurity through a cultural lens in order to better understand how culture as a central construct readily influences the status of food security and food insecurity.

Drawing on literature and his experience as a researcher on food culture, anthropologist E. N. Anderson contends that food serves as a form of communication and, as a result, establishes individuality and situates an individual in society (2005). Therefore, food serves as a vehicle for understanding a lifestyle.

Unhealthy food practices are integrally tied to aspects of an individual's life because such practices associate the person with a particular view of the world, and in turn, these practices have come to define the person as an individual. Consequently, Anderson concludes that breaking away from particular food habits proves difficult because of the close association between food and identity. "People know the lifestyle is unhealthy, and the food is not usually good-tasting either, but it is their lifestyle, and people are loyal to it unto death" (Anderson, 2005, p. 128). As poverty and food insecurity demonstrate a positive correlation, lifestyle—the intersection of political identity, regional identity, relationships, social status, and geographic situation—and food are also correlated.

Woolgar (2010) explains that the relationship between food and culture becomes evident when understanding the reason behind eating certain foods. The author writes, "If we are to understand the role of food in culture, we need to appreciate why things were eaten" (Woolgar, 2010, p. 7). He also contends that food reflects social aspirations and cultural customs, which sheds light onto how ordinary life was lived among people in a particular era.

Cultural Understanding in Social Science Research

Edward Burnett Tylor defines culture as the "complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (as cited in Das, 1998, p. 172). Further,

Tylor describes culture as a dynamic force that is acquired by the individuals of a particular segment of society.

As the topic of food insecurity is approached through a lens that accounts for the participant's worldview, the goal of this study is to develop a cultural understanding of the problem. Cultural understanding asks the researcher and the participant to engage in a conversation that ultimately begins to reveal and share held meanings on behalf of the participant, which are directly related to behaviors and beliefs promoted within and among a community (Dutta, 2008). Scholars who seek to understand a particular culture of interest approach the participants with open-ended questions, ready to understand the constructs that are embedded in the culture.

METHODOLOGY

The methodological framework for this study was ethnography (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Reeves, Kuper, & Hodges, 2008). This study employed in-depth interviewing using a semi-structured series of open-ended questions with follow-up probes. Example questions included: What is important to you when getting or preparing food for your family? Where do you get your food? What are the struggles you face when it comes to food?

Each interview was examined through the theoretical lens of grounded theory. Grounded theory was selected as the theoretical framework, because it allowed for conceptual frameworks to emerge from the data, ultimately informing the researcher's understanding of a particular topic (Charmaz, 2006).

Each interview was first analyzed using open coding, which begins to reveal patterns in the data. From open coding comes focused coding, followed by axial coding and selective coding, all of which continue to synthesize data, resulting in a set of themes that are unique to each set of interviews (Charmaz, 2006).

Description of Participants

A total of ten individuals were interviewed for this project. Five of them were considered food insecure and five were identified as food secure. Those recognized as food insecure lived at a transitional housing complex in a large downtown metropolitan city. Due to the nature of the apartment complex, all five participants had been homeless for a period of time prior to taking up residence in the apartments. All five participants used food stamps. Of the five, there were four women and one man. All had children living with them, ranging in age from infant to

young adult. The participants reported various health restrictions, including diabetes, mental disorders, and chronic pain. All five are enrolled in a nutrition class offered on a weekly basis at their apartment building.

Participants recognized as food secure also resided in the same large metropolitan area. Three of the participants lived downtown, and two of the participants resided in the suburbs in the same county. Of the five participants, there were three women and two men. All of the participants were employed outside of the home in some capacity. All of the participants had children ranging in age from toddler to young adult, and two of the participants were pregnant.

RESULTS

Through analyzing the interviews, different themes for each group, food secure and food insecure, emerged. For the food insecure, the themes were “the negotiation of two cultures” and “the limitations of knowledge” (Figure 2). For the food secure, the themes were “ramifications of childhood experiences” and “stresses and habits in food security” (Figure 3).

THE FOOD INSECURE

Negotiating Two Distinct Cultures

The interviews with participants indicate that the personal cultures of the food insecure are coming up against the food secure culture being taught in

Figure 2. Within the food insecure culture, two defining characteristics that emerged from the interviews were: negotiating two distinct cultures and the limitations of gained knowledge. Courtesy of Abigail Borron.

Figure 3. Within the food secure culture, two defining characteristics that emerged from the interviews were: the implications of childhood experience and the stresses and habits in food security. Courtesy of Abigail Borron.

the nutrition class they attend. Consequently, the individuals are trying to ascertain how to meld their past experiences and cultures with what they are being taught (Figure 4).

As part of the nutrition class, the participants explain that they are learning about cooking and food. Penny is learning about the positive effects of drinking water. Carol has learned how her diet impacts her diabetes. Jenny sees how her serving sizes impact her weight. Sara has learned how to cook healthy foods on a budget. Richard now understands the different fat contents in milk.

Even with this new and accepted knowledge, the former experiences of the food insecure participants continue to play a significant role in their current food habits. Jenny, Penny, Carol, and Richard believe that meat is an essential component of every meal. As Penny explains, “We like hamburgers, pork chops, ribs, and fish,” which are common and primary staples at every meal. Penny also reported that her former drug addiction has resulted in an addiction to sugar, making her weight difficult to manage. Sara and her siblings are responsible for cooking their own meals with the food purchased by their mother: “When my mom came home on the weekends, she would do the shopping and she would put the food in there and then we just cooked what was in there. Usually, then, just buy whatever was on sale. There were five kids so we didn’t really have a lot of food at the time.” The new information presented to Sara in the class offers her an alternative way of planning and purchasing groceries.

Limitations of Gained Knowledge

In the nutrition class, participants are provided information and instruction on how to improve health and procure stability in their food throughout the entire month. However, due to the fact that they are living in a transitional housing complex downtown and are dependent on food stamps for the bulk of their nourishment, they are limited to the extent of what they can put into practice.

Although the food insecure participants reported that they are taught about the importance of budgeting, their reliance on the food stamp cycle makes it difficult to meld the knowledge of budgeting with the food stamps. Penny receives \$526 per month in food stamps for herself and her two teenage sons, and she relies on a meat delivery truck to supply her with food until the end of the month. “At the end of the month, I run low on food. . . . [There is] a guy that I just ran across, he has a food truck and he comes in,” she says. “I’ve ran low at the end of the month, and he gives us food until our stamps come in so that also helps a lot.”

Additionally, without access to a vehicle, the residents are bound to a specific geographic area with only one grocery store within walking distance. Consequently, they cannot utilize certain grocery stores with lower prices for their food needs due to lack of transportation. Carol epitomizes her limitations. Bound to a wheelchair when moving outside the apartment complex where she resides, and with no access to a car, Carol finds herself relying on her family to walk to the grocery store with her. “It’s a family thing,” she explains. If the residents of this complex wish to access another store, they are reliant on family or other resources to take them there.

THE FOOD SECURE

The Implications of Childhood Experience

Throughout the interviews with the food secure participants, the participants consistently referred to personal childhood experiences and the significance those experiences have on their current food and lifestyle choices (Figure 5).

All of the participants note that they strive to consistently eat meals with their families. Ellen, John, and Pete cite that childhood memories of eating with family plays a significant role in shaping how they relate to meals with their families. Pete explains, “[Sunday lunches with family] created an atmosphere of unity, and it was a safe place where you could take your shoes off.” John remembers meals as an important aspect of his family culture growing up: “We certainly were not very wealthy, but my mom always took a lot of time to try to prepare meals. . . . I still value meals together, because we grew up doing that with our family.”

For Ellen, Suzy, and Diann, childhood experiences impact the way they cook today. Ellen learned the basics of cooking from a local 4-H program, whereas Suzy

finds herself turning to recipes from her childhood when preparing meals for her family: “Not that I haven’t incorporated new recipes into our little repertoire or that I don’t try new recipes occasionally, because I do, but when you’re busy it’s a lot easier to go with something you know, and it’s probably something you’re craving because you like it.” Further, Diann’s childhood memories of cooking spur her to create a new cooking culture: “I feel like I’m always trying to think about things that are simple, and I feel like growing up it was more everything was just a production all the time.”

Stresses and Habits in Food Security

The habits and frustrations that the food secure population struggle with revolve around the fact that the food secure have resources and the autonomy to make decisions about their food and put those decisions into action.

The participants report that hectic personal schedules play into how they choose to pursue cooking and eating habits. Diann and Suzy, both of whom are pregnant, explain that they struggle with fatigue. Suzy explains, “Some days I’m like ‘There’s no way I’m cooking today,’ and we scrounge.” Ellen strives to make cooking an enjoyable hobby, because caring for four children, working part-time, volunteering at her children’s school, and caring for extended family doesn’t allow for a lot of personal time. “At this stage in my life, I don’t have time for a lot of hobbies,” she says, “but this is something that I have to do anyway, so I might as well make the best of it and really enjoy it.”

Diann, Suzy, and Ellen consistently form menu plans and take advantage of the ability to go to stores outside of walking distance. All of the women report that they currently or formerly shop at various stores in order to

Figure 4. The personal food culture of the food insecure is formed from their previous experiences and personal tastes meeting with the knowledge from the nutrition class they attend.

Figure 5. The personal food culture of the food secure encompasses and is the result of their childhood experiences, previous cooking experience, and the resources they have available.

take advantage of the best deals. Suzy and Ellen purchase foods on sale and create stockpiles for future use. “When I say I menu planned, it is not something that we are bound to,” Ellen explains. “I change it a lot. It’s just ‘Here are some ideas of things [that] I plan to have on hand and things I will be shopping for.’”

John explains that his wife shops at a grocery store about 15 minutes away from their home. Pete says that he and his family have a challenge with finding affordable food: “When you live in the inner city where you don’t have a large selection of quality grocery stores, then you have to drive further out to go to those places.”

Limitations of Study

This study revealed distinct differences between the food insecure and food insecure due to the negotiation of two cultures, the limitations of gained knowledge, the implications of childhood experience, and the stresses and habits in food security. However, the findings and resulting themes that emerged from the collected data cannot be generalized across both groups for two reasons. The first is that, as previously explained, culture is a dynamic force acquired by individuals. Consequently, the changing nature of culture limits this study. Additionally, the sample size of both groups is small and restricted to a single large metropolitan city.

CONCLUSIONS

The ethnographic methodological framework and a grounded theory theoretical framework of this study allowed the researcher to richly examine attitudes, beliefs, values, and patterns of the food insecure and secure populations through the perspective of select group members. Additionally, the coding and analysis processes garnered a rich dataset that revealed unique characteristics of the food secure and the food insecure. The food insecure find themselves trying to develop their personal food culture in light of their past and the knowledge gained from the nutrition class, while, at the same time, they are bound to the limitations that arise from their geographical situation and dependence on food stamps (Figure 4). Meanwhile, the food secure revealed that their current food culture is the result of childhood experiences, previous cooking experiences, and access to various resources (Figure 5). The themes that resulted from the two sets of interviews with the food secure and the food insecure revealed that food insecurity is not solely created by a lack of economic resources. Rather, the themes show a cultural divergence between the two groups, which explains how the lifestyles and peripheral issues of each group impact how the participants access and eat food.

Based on the findings of this study, two pressing questions arise for future research. First, how can the limitations

of the food insecure be comprehensively addressed in nutritional and educational programs without overlooking the various obstacles that often hinder their ability to put new knowledge into practice? As evidenced in this study, the food insecure participants were willing to learn about nutrition and healthy practices. However, the limitations of their lifestyle prevented them from implementing the learned practices. Second, how can the food insecure maintain their distinct personal food culture while incorporating recommended nutritional practices into that culture? As this study indicated, food and food practices may be the entry points for examining food insecurity. However, it is the cultural lens that lends itself to better understanding an individual’s preferred approaches to food, in addition to negotiating various food situations.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to recognize the participants of this project who made this study of food culture possible. The ethnographic approach of this study required participants who were willing to share their personal narratives and to describe the joys and struggles they encountered in life. From the personal homes of the food secure to the community room of the food insecure, I found myself captivated and deeply moved by the participants’ willingness to recount their life stories and how those stories shape their food culture.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, E. N. (2005). *Everyone eats: Understanding food and culture*. New York: New York University Press.
- Borron, A. S. (2012). *A culture-centered approach to health and nutrition among low-income groups: Recommendations for land-grant university engagement*. (Doctoral dissertation.) Retrieved from <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/dissertations/AAI13543373/>
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. London: Sage Publications.
- Coleman-Jensen, A., Nord, M., Andrews, M., & Carlson, S. (2010). Household food security in the United States in 2010. *United States Department of Agriculture*. Retrieved from http://www.ers.usda.gov/media/121076/err125_2_.pdf
- Das, V. (1998). Wittgenstein and anthropology. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 27(1), 171–195. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.27.1.171>
- Dutta, M. J. (2008). *Communicating health: A culture-centered approach*. Malden: Polity Press.
- Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (2007). *Ethnography: Principles in practice* (3rd ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Jetter, K. M., & Cassady, D. L. (2006). The availability and cost of healthier food alternatives. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 30(1), 38–44. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2005.08.039>
- Morton, L. W., Bitto, E. A., Oakland, M. J., & Sand, M. (2008). Accessing food resources: Rural and urban patterns of giving and getting food. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 25(1), 107–119. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10460-007-9095-8>
- Reeves, S., Kuper, A., & Hodges, B. D. (2008). Qualitative research methodologies: Ethnography. *BMJ*, 337, a1020. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.a1020>
- United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service. (2012). State fact sheets: Indiana—Population, income, food insecurity, education, and employment. Retrieved from <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/state-fact-sheets/state-data.aspx?StateFIPS=18&StateName=Indiana>
- World Health Organization. (2012). Trade, foreign policy, diplomacy, and health: Food security. Retrieved from <http://www.who.int/trade/glossary/story028/en/>
- Woolgar, C. M. (2010). Food and the middle ages. *Journal of Medieval History*, 36(1), 1–19. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jmedhist.2009.12.001>