

OC14055

Food and Identity: Food Studies, Cultural, and Personal Identity

Gina M. Almerico, Ph.D.
The University of Tampa

Introduction

The author's interest in the study of food and identity manifested as a result of being awarded an international studies grant from her institution's Office of International Programs to study food habits in Naples, Italy. As a professor in the Education Department, she had recently been assigned to teach the social studies methods class for undergraduate elementary education majors. This class is offered to students in the first semester of their senior year with the focus being an investigation of effective instructional techniques and strategies to engage children in learning the social studies. In 2010, the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) published *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment*. NCSS standards ensure an integrated social science, behavioral science, and humanities approach for achieving academic and civic competence that can be used by social studies decision makers in K-12 schools. These standards have had a significant impact on the teaching of social studies to children. Of the 10 strands in the NCSS standards, Strand 1, Culture and Strand 3, Individual Development and Identity, are devoted to concepts related to the International Faculty Development Seminar in which the author participated in Italy focusing on Food and Identity. The two strands related to food and identity as defined by the NCSS are as follows:

Culture – This theme, with a strong relationship to anthropology, focuses on the fact that humans create culture as a way of making sense of their social and physical worlds.

Individual Development and Identity – This theme focuses on the importance of individual development and the relationship of individuals to others that inhabit their social world. This theme helps individuals consider how their own identity was formed and how it influences their attitudes and beliefs. This theme is drawn from social psychology, sociology, and anthropology.

Food Studies as it relates to the NCSS Strands of culture and individual development and identity will be explored in this paper. In addition to the NCSS strands, several questions which emerged as a result of the trip to Italy will be contemplated in this paper:

- What does the food on my plate signify?
- How do food practices contribute to personal identity?
- What are examples of how food and food habits contribute to the development and transmission of culture?

What is Food Studies?

Food Studies is an emerging interdisciplinary field of study that examines the complex relationships among food, culture, and society from numerous disciplines in the humanities, social sciences, and sciences. Food studies is not the study of food itself; it is different from more traditional food-related areas of study such as agricultural science, nutrition, culinary arts, and gastronomy in that it deals with more than the

simple production, consumption, and aesthetic appreciation of food. It is the study of food and its relationship to the human experience. This relationship is examined from a variety of perspectives lending a multidisciplinary aspect to this field encompassing areas such as, art, sociology, education, economics, health, social justice, literature, anthropology, and history. Several institutions in the United States and abroad are now offering programs in this field.

Why Food Studies?

Food studies looks at people's relationships with food and reveals an abundance of information about them. Food choices expose a group or a person's beliefs, passions, background knowledge, assumptions and personalities. Hauck-Lawson (2004) introduced the concept of food voice. She suggested that what one eats or chooses not to eat communicates aspects of a person's identity or emotion in a manner that words alone cannot. Food choices tell stories of families, migrations, assimilation, resistance, changes over times, and personal as well as group identity. So why do we need to study food in a non-epicurean manner? Food studies can challenge us to look deeply into the common daily occurrence of eating and find deeper meaning in this ordinary practice. It can help us understand ourselves and others better. It can help debunk stereotypes and promote acceptance across individuals and groups. In essence, food studies, why not?

Eating Versus Feeding

Food provides animals the nutrients needed to maintain life and growth when ingested. When most animals feed, they consume foods needed for their well-being and do so in a similar way at each feeding. Humans, however, do not feed, they eat. This trait distinguished humans from other animals. Humans gather, hunt, cultivate plants, and raise livestock for food consumption. Humans also cook, use utensils to eat and institute a complex set of rules following a code of etiquette to govern how to eat appropriately. The human trait of sharing food is exclusive to its species. Humans relate to food in a way that is unique to mankind. We do not simply feed.

Food and Identity

Kittler, Sucher, and Nelms (2012) coined the term food habits (also known as food culture or foodways) to describe the manner in which humans use food, including everything from how it is chosen, acquired, and distributed to who prepares, serves, and eats it. They stated that the significance of the food habits process is that it is unique to human beings. They pondered why people spend so much time, energy, money, and creativity on eating.

A familiar saying that epitomizes the idea of food and identity is, "You are what you eat." This expression addresses two of the questions considered in the research: What does the food on my plate signify? and How do food practices contribute to personal identity? These questions address the concept of food as a cultural signifier

and encompass fields as diverse as literature, anthropology, sociology, and history. Research shows that the relationship between the foods people eat and how others perceive them and how they see themselves is remarkable. Sadella and Burroughs (1981) surveyed individuals about their perceptions of themselves as consumers of food and how they viewed others based on their dietary habits. The researchers listed foods which were distinctive to five different diets: fast food (pizza, hamburgers, and fried chicken), synthetic food (Carnation Instant Breakfast, Cheez Whiz), health food (yogurt, protein shake, and wheat germ), vegetarian (bean sprout sandwich, broccoli quiche, avocado, and brown rice), and gourmet food (French roast coffee, caviar, oysters). They learned participants in the study associated different personality types with the food choices made for each of the five diets. People who eat fast food and synthetic food were classified as religious conservatives who often wore polyester clothing. Health food personalities were characterized as antinuclear activists and Democrats. Vegetarians were likely to be perceived as pacifists who drive foreign cars. Gourmet food eaters were seen as individuals who were liberal and sophisticated. These stereotypes were established through self-descriptions and personality tests which were completed by individuals whose diets fell into the five categories.

Another study examined people's perceptions of similar looking individuals based on the foods they consumed. Stein and Nemeroff (1995) asked university students to rate profiles of individuals based on their diets. The students were shown pictures of sets of two nearly identical looking people. One person in each pair was classified as the "good" food eater and the other was the "bad" food eater. Physically, all else was similar. Students judged the people who ate "good" foods in a more favorable light. They found the "good" food eaters to be thinner, active, and more fit than persons with the same physical characteristics and exercise habits who ate "bad" foods. In addition, the persons who ate "good" foods were rated as more attractive, likable, quiet, practical, methodical, and analytical than those who ate "bad" foods.

Social and psychological factors have an influence on people's food habits and choices. Larson and Story (2009) examined these influences on the choices people make in food consumption. They learned that children tend to choose foods eaten by admired adults, like their teachers but not their parents. Children also chose food similar to that eaten by favorite fictional characters, peers, and especially their older brothers and sisters. Social conscience and peer pressure impact food choices (Brown, 2011). It was found that group approval or disapproval of a given food had an impact on food choices. If the group favored the food choice, a person is more likely to accept that food as part of his or her diet. On the other hand, when the group disapproves of a food choice, the person making the selection generally rejects the food in question. This may explain why some relatively unpalatable food items such as unsweetened espresso coffee were enjoyed by the author and her colleagues at numerous coffee bars in Naples, Italy. The culture in which she and her cohorts were immersed strongly approved of coffee breaks with espresso being the coffee of choice.

Food as an expression of identity is apparent in the experience of going out to eat. McComber and Postel (1992) suggested that restaurants serve more than food.

They strive to satisfy nutritional and emotional needs in their clientele. When deciding where to dine out, consumers may consider a variety of factors, such as, the menu, atmosphere, service, location, and cost or value of the meal. It was found most restaurants cater to specific types of customers and that the same diner may choose a venue based on current needs. For instance, in the parent role, a quick, inexpensive restaurant with a playground is a good choice. That same diner may choose a business club which features a conservative setting for a work-related meeting. A candle-lit bistro with soft music and bottles of wine would be appropriate for a romantic evening out with a significant other. Ethnic restaurants hold an allure to clients as well. They appeal to natives of the homeland represented by offering familiarity and authenticity in foods served. For those who do not share the ethnicity of a dining establishment, the experience allows them to explore the novelty of a different and maybe even unfamiliar culinary adventure.

Psychological needs intertwine with social factors when foods are used more for the meaning they represent more than the nourishment they offer or provide (Brown, 2011).

Food and Symbolism

Food has symbolic meanings based on association with other meaningful experiences. An example of the symbolic meanings including food references can be found in many of our common expressions. Bread is a good example of the symbolism found in foods. When people sit together with friends at a meal they are said to break bread with one another. This expression symbolizes a setting where friends come together in a warm, inviting and jovial manner to eat. Bread has been called the staff of life. The type of bread consumed by a person has been known to indicate social standing. For instance, white bread has traditionally been eaten by the upper class (also known as the upper crust – a bread reference) while dark bread is consumed by the poor. Whole wheat bread is the bread of choice in today's society by persons concerned more with their health than their status. An affluent person has "a lot of bread." In some cultures, bread is shared by couples as part of their wedding ceremony. In the Christian religion it represents the body of Christ in the sacrament of communion. Superstitions about bread have also been documented. Greek soldiers take a piece of bread from home into battle to ensure their safe and triumphant return home. Sailors traditionally bring a bun on their journeys to prevent shipwrecks. English midwives would place a loaf of bread at the foot of a new mother's bed to prevent the woman and her child from being kidnapped by evil spirits.

Cultural Identity

Culturally speaking, in essence, what one eats defines who one is and is not. This statement addresses the third question asked in the research, what are examples of how food and food habits contribute to the development and transmission of culture? Culture is defined as the beliefs, values, and attitudes practiced and accepted by members of a group or community. Culture is not inherited; it is learned. The food

choices of different cultural groups are often connected to ethnic behaviors and religious beliefs. Kittler, P.G., Sucher, K.P., & Nelms (2012) addressed the influence of food habits on an individual's self-identity by stating, "Eating is a daily reaffirmation of [one's] cultural identity". Many people affiliate the foods from their culture, their childhood with warm, good feelings and memories. The food is part of who we are and become. It ties us to our families and holds a special worth to a person. Foods from our culture, from our family often become the comfort foods we seek as adults in times of frustration and stress.

As an Italian American, the author began to consider how her heritage, handed down through the food on her plate, signified who she has become today. During the seminar held in Naples, Italy, a focus of the lectures was an examination of how "Italian" food and the "Mediterranean diet" are marketed and have affected the socioeconomic reality of the region. During a lecture, the author asked about food traditions in Italian families. She learned a custom was the Sunday dinner. Every Sunday, the matriarch of the family prepared a large pot of spaghetti. The entire family then gathers together to eat pasta and enjoy each other's company at Nana's (Grandmother's) house. The author is a second generation Italian American. As a child, every Sunday morning her father (first generation Italian) and sometimes her mother (non-Italian) made spaghetti. It was a family tradition. Dear old Aunt Julia would come by precisely at dinner time with a hot loaf of bread (another Italian tradition is bring bread as a gift when invited for dinner) and the family ate and laughed and shared stories with one another. The warm buttered bread and a big salad were always served with the spaghetti. The memory as well as the spaghetti was delicious. This memory, connected to family's heritage and culture, confirmed to the author that food is much more than nutrients. There were emotional connections, a sense of belonging, and ethnic pride found in the food on the author's Italian plate.

Cultural identity, however, is not restricted by the specific foods one associates with a given ethnic or racial group. One's social class, standing in the community, and profession are signifiers of culture as well. For instance, in American society there are norms and standards which are followed in social settings when dining. The proper use of food and behaviors connected with civilized eating habits, also known as manners or etiquette is an expression of group membership. In the United States a certain set of appropriate dining expectations exist for a variety of dining occasions. One does not speak with a mouth full of food, especially during formal dining occasions. Certain conversational topics would be inappropriate to share at the dinner table. Sharing a meal with another person connotes equality and is a way to show acceptance of one another professionally and personally.

What is Learned?

We have discovered that food has a powerful impact on people and groups in our society. One can be perceived as likeable, attractive, more practical and analytic if the choices on the plate are "good". In the US, thin is in, and those who are perceived to

eat better are seen as more active and fit than those who do not. We have learned that people want to eat what those they admire eat. We are swayed by the need to be accepted for our food choices. We have learned that people will eat or drink something they find unpleasant or distasteful to be part of the crowd.

We have learned food symbolism permeates our social psyche. We use familiar expressions related to food to express joy, sorrow, significance, stature, etc. Sayings like, he's the big cheese, she's rolling in the dough, easy as pie, a bone to pick, and he's a good egg. A person's social status can be determined based on food and restaurant selections. A diet of rice and beans connotes poverty, whereas steak tartare connotes wealth. A five star restaurant is where one of abundance dines, where a chain restaurant is where one of middle class eats. The author remembered once having dinner with a gentleman who owned chain restaurants in London. During the conversation, she asked about the type of food his chain prepared. His comment was, "oh – it is just fare for the commoners". He made a definite distinction between what he and the commoners expected in a dining experience. We were eating at an exclusive golf club when the conversation occurred. We were obviously not dining on food for the commoners.

As an emerging field of inquiry, food studies is intriguing in that it examines food as it relates to the human experience. Close inspection of food practices reveals an abundance of information about individuals and groups including the economic, political, social, and cultural significance of food in society.

References

Brown, A. (2011). *Understanding food: Principles and preparation (4th ed.)*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Hauck-Lawson, A. (2004). Introduction to special issue on the food voice. *Food, Culture, and Society*, 7 (1), 24-25.

Kittler, P.G., Sucher, K.P., & Nelms, M.N. (2012). *Food and culture (6th ed.)*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Larson, N., & Story, M. (2009). A Review of Environmental Influences on Food Choices. *Annual Behavioral Medicine*; 38 Supplement 1; s56-73.

McComber, D.R. & Postel, R.T. (1992). The Role of Ethnic Foods in the Food and Nutrition Curriculum. *Journal of Home Economics*, 84, 52-54, 59.

National Council for the Social Studies (2010). *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment*. Washington, DC: Author.

OC14055

Sadella, E. & Burroughs, J. (1981). Profiles in Eating: Sexy Vegetarians and Other Diet-based Stereotypes. *Psychology Today* (October), 51-57.

Stein, R.I. & Nemeroff, C.I. (1995). Moral Overtones of Food: Judgments of Others Based on What They Eat. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 21, 480-490.