

# Food and nutrition education, culture and subjectivities: the school contributing to the development of critical and creative people around food culture

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This work was funded by CNPq/MDS/Sesan – Process no. 407514/2012-0

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## Abstract

From a series of group interventions, we built, with a group of students from public schools, reflections on nutrition and food education and culture in contemporary society. Using as theoretical basis for reflections the historical-cultural theory and history of food, we debated with students which historical, social, political, ideological and economic factors influence food culture and how to interfere in the formation of the subjectivity of the subject. We conclude that the debate on traditional eating habits has the merit of rescuing the culture and history of food, and how important it is to the formation of cultural and social identity of a people. Actions in food and nutrition education can enhance students' critical thinking regarding eating habits, which most often are imposed by media strategies of the food industry, and lead them to review the relationship they establish with food nowadays.

**Key words:** Education. Food. Food Habits. Food Industry Psychology. Culture.

## Introduction

### Food culture and history

Culture and history are social productions of human knowledge, human achievement and human creation. As a result, what we feel, think, speak and create are moments of creative work of human accomplishments in the context of a culture.

Experiences, habits, attitudes, values, the language of other individuals with whom the subject relates and other institutions, such as school, church, family groups, etc. are part of the construction of such elements. Hence, the history and culture of close and far ancestors are important pieces in the construction of human development.

However, such process is not a historical and cultural determinism in which individuals passively absorb certain behaviors to reproduce them later. These individuals should participate actively in building their own culture and history, changing themselves and causing changes in the institutions and other subjects with whom they interact.

Food would be a historical and cultural element that would go beyond the sense of nourishing oneself to survive. Food would be related to personal, subjective, family and historical aspects present in its preparation and consumption. Food would contain cultural aspects of a given society, community and religion.

According to Carneiro,<sup>1</sup> food therefore represents an act of a society's material culture, being part of its social infrastructure and superstructure – i.e. it is an ideological fact of society, of its religious, artistic and moral representations.<sup>1</sup> Food is one of the basic human needs, and to satisfy such need men organized themselves, and in doing so they created culture. In this regard, the processes involving food were used as key strategies for the people's communion and social organization.

According to Carvalho,<sup>2</sup> food has represented a wealth for man and has been able to express, throughout its history, the constitution of the social structures that made humans different from other animals. Food, therefore, would involve the organization (preparation for hunting or planting), work (hunt and harvest), and chores sharing (who would make fire, clean and cook the food). The issues involving such sharing (which are social) would include ways to get food, extractivism or plantation, animals raising or hunt, or even who would be in charge of planting and preparing the food, male and female roles that, to a certain extent, we have been reproducing until now in the household cares of food and education.

It was in cooking that prevailed the art of preparing foods, providing them with flavor, sense, and making them elements of the culture of that group. It was in the act of eating that we strengthened the family intimacy bonds and affection, and when gender and generation relationships, emotions and activities sprouted, which were translated into the man's relationships in the world and with the world.<sup>3</sup>

The fact that people get together to prepare certain foods put us in contact with regional cultural elements involving food and its preparation, such as the choice of certain spices, different meat cuts, the discard of some edible parts of the food, etc. Therefore, we can see that the food culture has a certain heritage and is the result of a long learning process that begins at birth and consolidates in the family and social context.

For this reason, it is easy to understand that some differences in eating habits can be experienced with a mix of surprise, oddness, mistrust and, in some cases, disgust. How people eat, the products used and cooking forms are associated with the peculiarities of each people, such as local resources, climate and soil characteristics – i.e. with the land, production systems, agriculture, animal farming, storage practices and commerce.<sup>4</sup>

As Zunin<sup>5</sup> states, this set of elements and everything relating to them are perceived as “ethnic markers”. In other words, food and eating practices are one of the elements that contribute to “providing elements of the subject's identity”, based on the food differences observed.

In general, food and cooking practices are “imprinted” in a given anthropological and socioeconomic context. According to Carvalho,<sup>2</sup> if food by itself was a cultural wealth, over time new materials and techniques were incorporated, allowing the accumulation of food surpluses. Food then could be exchanged, assuming values and prices, thus expressing a process of social transformation.

In the contemporary era, food seems to suffer the impositions of a force field that has in the globalization and neoliberalism model its examples. Thus, the food that can be reproduced precisely in form, taste, texture and color in the most different, distant regions in the planet, and the food cooked in the fastest way, which provides pleasure and nutritional adequacy, will be the most valued ones.

Therefore, the modern world, marked by speed, overproduction and spare food products, does not value the rituals that surround meals. Lack of time has led the neoliberal system to develop a market of prepackaged, frozen, practical, individualized foods. The contemporary world does not allow us to spend our time in “futilities” such as choosing, cleaning and cooking food and sitting at the dining table and there spending our time eating and talking without much objectivity.

## The contemporary food culture

In a certain way, the food industry is a clear example of how the capitalist organization modifies cultural eating habits and ends up minimizing the eating culture of a community. Brazilians, given the mixture of three ethnic matrices (indigenous, European and African), developed a rich food culture. However, given the ills of the modern world, they are losing it day by day. Highly processed foods are placed on the table of Brazilians and fast foods services take the place of cooking and sharing everyday's family meals.

It was not fortuitous the growing success of fast food chains, as addressed by Rial,<sup>6</sup> which have invested heavily on food advertising and, by means of images, disseminated new representations of the contemporary way of living, highlighting operationalization, fast cooking and standardization of the food taste.

Rial<sup>6</sup> underlined the specificity of fast food cuisine in disseminating new forms of eating, in redefining the meal spaces and time, along with the modification of the meals structure itself. In the past, meals were geographically, temporarily and symbolically marked, sparing time for eating the meals, stimulating family sociability, or interrupting the workday, marking daily and non-daily moments. Eating practices in modern world and shifts in eating habits are moved by the delimitation of new spaces and speed.

In general, food would represent the expression of the social and cultural background of a community, the symbolic key of customs, a subjective code that would imprint, forge identities, express and bring to light a way of thinking and feeling the world.

Observations of the diverse symbolic elements that surround foods would facilitate the interpretation of the concepts built by different social subjects, justifying their food practices and their concrete articulations of daily life, as life strategies. These strategies could be addressed by Food and Nutrition Education (FNE), because they symbolize the subjective processes that are behind the preference of certain foods to others, bring cultures to light and retrieve the history of individuals and their community. In short, food and nutrition education could provide elements to the subjects to make them knowledgeable of their food culture and the culture of their people.

Therefore, based on these considerations, we could associate some aspects of food practices with cultural factors, expressed by conscious or unconscious food consumption, which could lead to malnutrition. The key cultural roles that foods would play in the society would be part of attempts to change or improve the individuals' eating habits.

Consumption of certain foods in the present time also reveals social aspects. When foods are consumed by a group of people and provided with a symbolic value, they would represent a social *status*, based on the fact that in the contemporary world, a *gourmet* lifestyle has been a usual practice among the upper classes (pleasurable, rare, nutritious, and individually tailored foods). On the other hand, among the lower classes, foods are merely caloric, no matter where these calories come from, which serve to mitigate hunger and energize the individual. Therefore, we can see that food has economic, social and cultural connotations and can affect the individuals' nutrition when their choices excludes essential nutrients or stimulate the consumption of certain foods or beverages.

*In fact, if we reverse the social point of view of reference and move from the poverty to the wealth context, the mechanism of formation of tastes also seems to be reversed. Object and desire are no longer food in abundance, but rare food; no longer the food that lessens and satisfies hunger, but the one that stimulates and invites to eat more.*<sup>7</sup> (author's translation).

Today, industrialization and technology enabled the overproduction and cheapening of foods, but such products, dysfunctional and hyper caloric, are intended for a population with meager financial resources, while functional, gourmet, healthy foods are targeted to the richest social classes.

## Food and Nutrition Education

Since the 1990s, scientific researchers have showed that the increase of various chronic degenerative diseases were related to the population' eating habits. This paved the way for the implementation of public policies that postulated food and nutrition education (FNE) as a necessary measure for the improvement of the population health.

Rocha<sup>8</sup> indicated that the National Food and Nutrition Policy (PNAN) and FNE were factual parameters for the promotion of healthy eating practices, but both neither moved ahead in the discussion nor set standards to promote a critical and cultural education on food and nutrition.

According to Boog,<sup>9</sup> the promotion of FNE should value and retrieve food-related historical and cultural elements, considering food security and either respecting or changing beliefs and attitudes towards food. It should also take into account the economic and social access of the population to appropriate foods, discussing it in the community, school and health programs.

Other components of the cultural, social and ecological context involving food and nutrition should also be examined, so that the population's beliefs and values about nutrition are recognized, respected, reflected and discussed in-depth, and, perhaps, changed. Thus, food and eating would be seen as historical-cultural issues, surpassing the sense of feeding merely for survival, once food and eating habits contain the history and cultural aspects of a given society, community and region – e.g., rituals, specific kinds of foods consumption (generally related to religious precepts), diverse manufacturing and production ways, among many others.

According to Valente,<sup>10</sup> if we considered the historical and social processes that are behind nutrition and a possible strengthening of social movement groups in claiming more critical and healthy foods, we could create a more effective action on the reality of Brazilian nutrition.

Therefore, a more critical FNE would play an important role in educating subjects on the choice of their foods.

In human nutrition, nature and culture should meet, because eating is a vital necessity and when and with whom we are eating are aspects that are part of a system that involve the attribution of meanings to the eating action. As a social phenomenon, eating would not be limited to being a response to the imperative of survival, i.e. “eat to live”, because if people needed to survive (and, for that, eat), they would survive in a particular manner, culturally forged and marked. In other words, people create different “ways of living”, resulting in great cultural diversity.

Therefore, it is the educators' role to establish a dialogue with the community to show that eating has other elements besides the mere intake of foods. Eating would involve respect, rules, social relationships, commensalities and fun. In short, eating would involve culture and history that would be placed on a good table.

## Objectives

Developing actions in food and nutrition education to a group of high school students of a public state school with the purpose of investigating the historical, cultural, media and ideological elements that would be present in food, and question the heavy consumption of global, highly processed foods.

## Methods

Our action was structured methodologically to build reflection or insight spaces in the school that would make students think on contemporary foods and eating practices, considering historical and critical elements regarding the food culture. To this end, we employed psychology group interventions, discussions with the students under the coordination of the research trainees and the theoretical support of the institutional, social and community psychology and the liberating pedagogy.

Documents relating to the approval of the research ethics committee were submitted to the school managers, who supported us in requesting the parental permission to carry out the activities with the students. Our action with the students consisted of conducting two psychosocial intervention workshops related to the researched topic – food education and Brazilian food culture –, held on Saturday mornings along with other activities of the Family School.

Seventeen students aged 12 to 16 years, of both sexes, attended the first workshop. During this session, we developed a series of psychological activities (group dynamics, reflection groups, and debates on documentary snippets about food culture), coordinated by scholarship students and supervised by the project coordinator and the responsible researcher.

Reflection and insights on the kind of foods that we consumed and how they were consumed in earlier historical periods was the major issue addressed in the works. Economic, global issues, which would intensify the food industry and shift our habits, changing our food culture, were also discussed. Thus, we debated with the students topics such as the food currently sold in supermarkets. We also emphasized the importance of meals that can be eaten pleasantly, allowing the retrieval of forgotten subjective processes, such as family gatherings around a lunch table and the alchemy of spices that provide us with new flavors.

The second workshop was conducted with 15 students aged 12-16 years, of both sexes, many of whom also attended the first workshop. The workshop aimed to review and discuss our eating habits based on practical activities. During this activity, we used the utensils and cooking materials of the school kitchen, where we had the opportunity to prepare some recipes of the Brazilian cuisine. By addressing the historical and social issues around the Brazilian's food habits when we cooked the recipes, we discussed the use of manioc flour, which in addition to making tasty dishes can provide the required energy to resist regional climates and struggles. We talked about *cupuaçu* and *açaí*, which are foods that are present in the south and southeast of Brazil, very common in the north region and prepared differently in each region. We also debated on common and tasty dishes around the country, capable of defining us as a people, as is the case of rice and beans.

## Results and conclusion

The main discussions with the groups indicated that the characteristics of contemporary lifestyle influenced significantly the eating behaviors of youths. Given the massive offer of processed food options and prepackaged preparations, besides the media appeal, the influence of marketing strategies and foods technology, individuals would be losing social and collective contact with earlier ritualistic ways involving food preparation. Food has become a standard consumer object to be taken from the shelves of the supermarket – just take it from the package and heat it.

Another issue that drew much attention of the group and was the focus of several considerations was about the contemporary diseases related to overeating, with emphasis on obesity.

It was discussed with the group that in the contemporary society, overconsumption of superfluous foods culminates in overweight and obesity of part of the population. Excessive food intake, especially of ultra-processed foods, has contributed to the occurrence of chronic degenerative diseases as one of the main causes of morbidity and mortality in the country. In all social classes, there has been an increased consumption of superfluous and dysfunctional products because of decreasing prices, technology that increased production and the aggressive advertising that did not even care to preserve the children.

In our actions, we showed that FNE would be one of the existing ways to promote health, to reflect on eating behaviors and on the awareness of a healthy nutrition.

The debate also focused on the re-establishment of social meals with close persons. Eating together, sharing meals strengthens the social relations that once were achieved around the dining table and, currently, are rejected and replaced by individualized, processed, fast meals, which we do in our daily lives to meet the demands of a hasty and hyper-individualist society. The conception of learning based on this action was based on the idea that the student would be an active subject and that many of his/her experiences would be shared around the dining table and, consequently, would establish dialogues with other more experienced subjects.

According to Boff,<sup>11</sup> family relations were continuously built and rebuilt around the dining table. The dining table, which earlier was more than a piece of furniture, was an existential experience, a ritual. It represented a privileged family place, of communion and unity. The food was shared and, along it, came the joy of being together, the well-being without disguises, the direct communion that was translated by the freedom of expressing comments on daily facts, of uncensored opinions about local, national or international events. In addition to family members sitting around the table, there could also be friends and guests. It would be at the dining table that all of us would somehow feel members of a human family.



Thus, in our workshops, through our actions, we always sought to show the importance of communication, dialogue. According to Freire,<sup>12</sup> dialogue can also be problematized. Such denomination given by the author refers to the task that educators should develop, i.e., making the students reflect and think critically about the things that surround them. By making the student think critically, the educator opens the way for the production and construction of knowledge.

## Conclusions

Educating in the field of food and nutrition should aim to a joint construction of permanent and continuous processes to improve the discussions on appropriate, healthy and safe foods selection and consumption. Valuing the cultural habits and traditions of individuals and their social group, added to the citizen awareness on food wastes and its full use, should be part of educational proposals on food and nutrition.

Being attentive to the opportunities of establishing consistent, deep and revealing dialogues should be the premise of any FNE action. According to Vigotsky,<sup>13</sup> language would act decisively on the thinking structure and would be a basic tool for building knowledge.

Therefore, de-constructing the knowledge or perceptions that a group would have regarding food, rebuilding them in the light of new considerations (particularly those that would be concealed by the marketing and food industries) and, concomitantly, retrieve the food culture ignored by the group, but which was constituent part of it, were the basic pieces that strengthened our actions.

Given the current economic development of our country and the globalization process, which exposes all kinds of goods and a marketing policy that hides information and predominantly values aesthetics, there is an excessive consumption of superfluous foods, culminating in overweight and obesity in part of the population. This kind of food would have contributed to the development of chronic degenerative diseases, leading to the main causes of morbidity and mortality in the country, in all social classes.

Thus, the present research-action on FNE contributed to the accomplishment of interventionist proposals to bring to light and deepen the cultural and social elements that permeate nutrition and the Brazilian eating practices. In addition, discussions on contemporary eating habits aim to safeguard subjects with the critical elements that enabled them to cope with mass culture and the capitalist food industry.

To date, our research-action had the merit of retrieving the culture and history of Brazilian food and how it has been all-important in building the Brazilian identity. Such retrieval allowed the development of a critical and active arsenal for the subject. Thus, non-preparation of the foods, together with the family members, saving the recipes and stories of generations, would make that the historical memories of a group and generations would not be retained, once tradition would also be related to memories, remembrances and customs. To retrieve the traditions that have been built and transmitted by several generations and responsible for the communion of people, the respect to the other as a human being, the transmission of moral values that are being lost, or have been lost in diverse instances of the cultural and social life, such tradition full of rituals around a dining table where commensality would be achieved, would be one of the most fundamental references of human familiarity that should be discussed and advocated in a FNE program.

Topics that associated food with tradition, rituals, customs, nutrients and taboos were addressed in our FNE approach. Hence, by “transmitting” historical values and rituals by means of teaching and learning situations enhanced the students’ knowledge on food.

The educational FNE allowed reflections on cultural and ideological aspects involving food. In addition, we found that the social relationships that once were built around the dining table are today rejected and replaced by individual, industrial and fast meals, which just serve to meet the demands of a hasty and hyper-individualist society.

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Received: January 29, 2015

Reviewed: March 10, 2015

Accepted: March 31, 2015

