



# The importance of the Human and Social Sciences in the undergraduate course in Nutrition: an experience report

## A importância das Ciências Humanas e Sociais no curso de graduação em Nutrição: um relato de experiência

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### Abstract

In this essay, a report of experience, a brief discussion is presented on the contribution of the social sciences to the study of Nutrition. It also presents the experience as a teacher in two disciplines offered for the undergraduate course in Nutrition at a state public university in Paraná: Food Anthropology and Sociology Applied to Nutrition. The focus is on the contribution to think, in a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary perspective, the curricular grade of the course. The positions of some authors of the social sciences, including those of Sociology and Food Anthropology, are presented. As an experiment, it is reported how the subjects have been conducted, the challenges and the perceived changes in the students regarding the importance of these contents in the academic formation, and how it is possible to observe the adoption of this knowledge in the activities of research and extension by the / of the students of said course. In spite of its reduced hours (68 hours / year for each subject), it is noticed that the contents developed in the classroom have contributed to broaden the view of the students when studying contents that help them understand the social, cultural and political aspects of food and nutrition.

**Keywords:** Anthropology. Food. Food and Nutrition Education.

## Resumo

Este ensaio, um relato de experiência, tem por objetivo apresentar breve discussão sobre a contribuição das ciências sociais para o estudo da nutrição, e relatar a vivência como docente em duas disciplinas ofertadas para o curso de graduação em Nutrição em uma universidade pública de âmbito estadual no Paraná, são elas: 'Antropologia da Alimentação' e 'Sociologia aplicada à Nutrição'. O foco está na contribuição para se pensar numa ótica multidisciplinar e interdisciplinar para a grade curricular do curso. São apresentados os posicionamentos de alguns autores das ciências sociais, incluindo aqueles da sociologia e antropologia da alimentação. Como experiência, é relatado como tem sido a condução de tais disciplinas, os desafios e as mudanças percebidas nos estudantes em relação à importância desses conteúdos na formação acadêmica e como é possível observar a adoção desses conhecimentos nas atividades de pesquisa e extensão por parte dos/das estudantes do referido curso. Apesar de suas reduzidas cargas horárias (68 horas/aula anuais para cada disciplina), é possível perceber que os conteúdos desenvolvidos em sala têm contribuído para ampliar o olhar dos discentes ao estudarem conteúdos que lhe auxiliam na compreensão dos aspectos sociais, culturais e políticos da alimentação e da nutrição.

**Palavras-chave:** Antropologia. Alimentação. Educação Alimentar e Nutricional.

## Introduction

The Political-Pedagogical Plan of an undergraduate course becomes more interesting when it can be, to the extent possible, a construction of disciplines with a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary bias, able to guide students to understand all the interfaces that permeate the area in which they intend obtain their basic training. In this sense, it is believed that Nutrition training should be built beyond the clinical view on feeding - which would be one whose central focus rests on the physiological and biological aspects of the food act. After all, as pointed out by Lima<sup>1</sup> in paraphrasing Mintz,<sup>2</sup> in addition to being an automatic and physiological behavior, Sociology, Anthropology and the History of Food have shown that eating is a behavior that binds intimately with the commensal or the eater. And it is still an act full of representations, like the defends Lody:<sup>3</sup> “no food that enters our mouths is neutral” (p.12).

I believe that the undergraduate who is able to obtain a more critical and comprehensive training in the various “environments and contours” of the food may find it easier to understand

the later challenges in the professional career, as well as being more apt to act in sectors that deal with social policies in food and nutrition. It is not a new idea, considering that this look is foreseen in the National Curricular Guidelines<sup>4</sup> of the course of Nutrition - the qualification of the professional to act in:

[...] promotion, maintenance and recovery of health and for the prevention of diseases of individuals or population groups, contributing to the improvement of the quality of life, based on ethical principles, with reflection on economic, political, social and cultural reality<sup>4</sup> (p.1).

In a research carried out on the teaching of the social and human sciences in the curriculum of Nutrition courses, Canesqui & Garcia<sup>5</sup> analyzed political-pedagogical plans of the Nutrition course of some Brazilian, American and English universities. The conclusion reached is that the disciplines of these areas are inserted in the curricula in a way that is not related to Nutrition, giving more general emphasis to each of the areas of human and social sciences, which do not necessarily correlate with food and nutrition. As the authors report:

The contents taught in the international courses are less dispersed and take food or nutrition as central objects of reflection and teaching. In the Brazilian case, one can notice the great heterogeneity in the approaches and the dissociation of the contents of the social sciences in relation to the issues associated with food in its totality and complexity. With a few exceptions, the programs have been concerned with promoting the interdisciplinary interlocation of Nutrition with the social sciences, which demands efforts to reconstruct the contents taught and bibliographical updates, knowing of their scarcity in Brazil, which can enrich and update the contents of teaching, especially of Anthropology<sup>5</sup> (272).

The authors highlight the resistance that occurs both on the part of the Nutrition area, which considers more relevant the analyzes and the research focused on the clinical and physiological areas, as well as on the part of the social sciences, that often do not see in the categories of Food and Nutrition aspects relevant to build a subject, or an object of analysis and research, and to enable professionals in the field.

In this regard, García<sup>6</sup> makes an important contribution in reflecting on the role of the social sciences, especially the contribution of Anthropology to the study of food. This author points out that, although the theme of food has been important for anthropologists since the earliest times - who recorded in their field notebooks the ways of eating, preparing the food, and also the main foods consumed by the groups studied - the year of 1968 is considered as the approximate beginning of the studies directed more specifically to the Anthropology of the Food, that is to say, when the approach of the food like culture happens to be analyzed of a more institutionalized form by Anthropology and the year of publication of the third volume of the series *Mythological*, by Claude Lévi-Strauss<sup>7</sup>: *The origins of manners at the table*.

García's<sup>6</sup> main contribution is to discuss, with great propriety, the possibilities and scope of Food Anthropology to relate to other disciplines whose central theme is food, and thus to constitute an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approach. In this sense, the author considers that:

For Anthropology the interest lies in finding meaningful social and cultural logic in food. [...] To see how food classifies facts, people, spaces and times and suggest what social meanings emerge from these classifications<sup>6</sup> (p.25).

Crotty<sup>8</sup> argues that food practice encompasses two meanings: one after food intake and related to the universe of biology (physiology and biochemistry), and that prior to ingestion. The latter is related to cultural and social issues, that is, to the social nature of eating. According to the author, in the field of Nutrition discipline, the latter aspect is given little value, even due to its technical-scientific objectives.

Agreeing to Crotty's perception, Delormier et al.<sup>9</sup> argue that not considering the social context, social and cultural aspects in the field of interest represents, in a way, a limitation to any discipline. The authors also analyze that the process of food choice is mostly not based on the nutritional option, but rather on the influences of everyday social life, which may be present in family relationships, but also in the workplace, in school and in other places of coexistence that allow exchanges and help to shape the food system of individuals.<sup>1</sup> They also pondered on the important role that social theories exert in the understanding of this dynamic:

People's eating patterns form in relation to other people, alongside everyday activities that take place in family groups, work and school. Eating does involve isolated choice, but it is choice conditioned by the context in which it occurs. Social theory provides theoretical guidance for studying the social nature of eating, approaching eating as integrally linked to context. Sociological and social anthropological studies of food have characteristically focused on food cultures and the collective character of eating patterns among social groups<sup>9</sup> (p. 217).

Harris<sup>10</sup> explains that the cultural customs and dietary traditions of each society is that they guide the eating habits, and this diversity must be respected and valued by those who study the subject of food. "As an anthropologist, I also subscribe to cultural relativism in terms of culinary tastes: habits should not be mocked or condemned simply because they are different"<sup>10</sup> (p.15).

This defense was also made by Mary Douglas and Ravindra Khare<sup>11</sup> in 1979 when they wrote a presentation on Food Anthropology in the important journal *Social Science Information*. In the article, the authors reported on the creation of the "international commission on anthropology of food", due to the need to discuss the policies and strategies that were being developed and implemented in situations of acute and/or chronic hunger in some nations at that time. They

pointed out in this article important aspects that must be observed in the implementation of food policies to solve hunger. These aspects concern the need to plan the solution of problems faced by countries in a situation of hunger, which involve health and hygiene policy knowledge of storage and distribution techniques, but they have emphatically pointed out the respect for cultural aspects:

It must be based on the analysis of society. The underlying conviction is that local patterns of food selection cannot be imposed, but depend on domestic life, on local ideas about physiological processes, on division of labor, on the schedule ...<sup>6</sup> (p. 30).

This argument makes clear the authors' differing understanding of the need for food anthropologists to interact with professionals from other fields, nutritionists, ecologists, economists, agronomists, politicians and other policy makers on the fight against hunger, so that the food culture is respected in social interventions. Question also defended by Valente,<sup>12</sup> in criticizing the limitation that exists in the isolated works in each specialty and to defend the interdisciplinarity in the elaboration of projects, because, made in isolation, each professional tends to see the problem of hunger with their own lenses, despising others possibilities.

The health professional "sees" malnutrition and disease and proposes vaccination, sanitation, breastfeeding, etc. The agronomist "diagnoses" lack of food and proposes greater food production, food aid, etc. The educator sees "ignorance and inadequate eating habits" and proposes food education. Classical economists "identify" poor food distribution and propose a better fiscal policy, generation of employment and income, etc. Planners diagnose "lack of coordination" and propose the creation of nutrition and empowerment councils<sup>12</sup> (p.52).

The Anthropology of Food provides the understanding about alterity, cultural diversity, cultural relativism associated with the eating habits and practices of the groups. In this understanding, the field of Nutrition acts as a network where the various aspects of food intertwine, facilitating the process of food choices and incorporation of diets.

In this line of understanding, Canesqui & Garcia<sup>13</sup> point out that:

Food choices are not only made with the most "nutritious" food, according to the classification of modern nutrition, or only with the most accessible and intensively offered by mass production. Despite pressures forged by the productive sector, as one of the mechanisms that interfere in the consumer decisions, culture, in a broader sense, shapes food selection, imposing the norms that prescribe, prohibit or allow what to eat<sup>13</sup> (p.9).

Poulain,<sup>14</sup> when analyzing the contribution of the social sciences to sociological perception, points out that the category of "food" has encountered difficulties to be included as a field of study

of this area, appearing “at first sight as a banal theme, one could say almost classical, a theme on which the different schools of thought would apply ‘their explanatory paradigms’”<sup>14</sup> (p.17). However, according to the author, in the contemporary context of food crises, more and more sociologists are invited by colleagues from areas that work directly in the areas of Food Science, Food Safety and Nutrition to elucidate some issues such as “what these areas designate as ‘the irrationality of diners or consumers’”<sup>14</sup> (p.18). Thus, the author discusses and analyzes, among others, contemporary food issues such as “the changes and permanence of food models”, “the impacts of globalization”, “the macdonaldization and reinvention of regional kitchens”, “the organization of daily life on the ways of eating”, “feelings of modern dietary risks”, and “medicalization of everyday food”. These are questions that allow the dialogue of Sociology with the area of Nutrition.

García<sup>6</sup> points out that the path of Sociology towards food is amplified mainly by the preoccupations in the West with the questions that pervade modernity in food, and highlights the work of two sociologists: Pierre Bourdieu<sup>15</sup> and Claude Fischler.<sup>16</sup>

Bourdieu who in 1979 published ‘The distinction. Criterion and social bases of taste’. A work that analyzes the concrete expressions of social difference in France. One of the aspects taken into account is that food, an element that allows it to establish a differentiation between foods of luxury and foods of necessity that would be those consumed by bourgeois and popular classes, respectively Fischler, who also in 1979, publishes his background paper for Communications ‘La Nourriture’, entitled ‘Gastronomy-gastroanomy’ had another component that opens the way to studies on food modernity in the West<sup>6</sup> (p.35).

Bourdieu’s work not only deals with aspects of the social distinction of food, but highlights some interesting points in this sense and contributes much in the dialogue between Nutrition and the Social and Human Sciences. For example, to understand what in the West is conventionally termed ‘strong food’ and ‘weak food’, ‘poor food’ and ‘rich food’, or how the rules of etiquette - or ‘eating in conformity’ and ‘eating without formalities’ - terms used by the author, are related to the formation of taste and how they may interfere with eating habits and choices. In this work, Bourdieu also discusses details such as the time of dedication employed in the preparation of meals by upper and lower classes, and how each relates to eating practices. “The taste in food also depends on the idea that each class makes of the body and the effects of feeding on it, that is, on its strength, health and beauty, as well as the categories used to evaluate such effects”<sup>15</sup> (p.179).

Already in his article, Claude Fischler discusses the causes that lead consumers in the developed countries of the West to have so many problems related to inadequate food. For the author, it happens that the consumer of the modern western society feeds almost daily in an almost compulsive way, nibbling here and there, without paying much attention to what he ingests. This way, supplies the body with calories much higher than it can burn, as well as the predilection for

foods with excess saturated fats and fast-absorbing sugars, and little attention is paid to the satiety of the body. Due to such behavior, the modern eater is enveloped in health problems, in need of dieting, losing weight and for this he needs to master hunger and the desire to eat, often using remedies for weight loss.

Fischler's article leads us to consider a situation that might not be necessary, except in specific cases, if the food act involved much more pleasure than obligation. It also indicates the need for greater investment by society in food education, considering that the modern diner can barely identify or know what he or she eats. This has also put doubt on their own food identity. The author points out that, in the midst of this situation of crisis, new forms of relationship with eating practices are emerging, which is visible in the expansion of culinary programs, even heavily highlighted by the mass media.

The questions pointed out by the authors tell us about the needs of the human being, the consumer-commensal (or eater, the expression most commonly used by Fischler) as a whole and in their sociocultural context. Food is not at present a simple and easy task to be solved in everyday life, so the different interfaces of the human being and the environment need to be well understood by the Nutrition professional. It has never been so important to think about food and food in its multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary context.

### **The practice of teaching in the disciplines of Sociology Applied to Nutrition and Food Anthropology in the undergraduate course in Nutrition**

The disciplines of "Food Anthropology" and "Sociology Applied to Nutrition" - subjects of the experience reported in this essay - focus on the following topics: "Concepts and discussion about commensality. Evolution in the food process; Food and culture; Eating Habits and Ideologies. Food and contemporary food risks; Process of formulating public policies with emphasis on nutrition. Hunger and malnutrition in contemporary Brazil. The issue of obesity as a social problem. The Western Food Model. The impact of the science-technology system on food consumption ". The methodological strategies of the subject are given through expository classes, with a strong stimulus to student debate and participation, always seeking to correlate themes to current issues and contextualizations, in order to facilitate understanding.

The disciplines are offered in the 1st and 2nd year of Nutrition. It has been noticed that the 1st year classes are more timid regarding participation, at least at the beginning of the course, but it is possible to observe a change a few months after the beginning of the discipline. Documentaries and films are widely used as a way to correlate with the theoretical approach studied. The readings are mandatory, and for each content there are some references presented and made available

to academics. There are several references used by both Anthropology and Sociology of Food. However, the authors most used in the disciplines are: Jean Pierre Poulain, Mabel Gracia Arnaiz, Jesus Contreras, Claude Fischler, Marshall Sahlins, Pierre Bourdieu, Luis da Câmara Cascudo, Massimo Montanari, Julian López García, Carlos Alberto Dória, Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, Roberto DaMatta, Mary Douglas, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Maria Eunice Maciel and Renata Menasche.

With the objective of extending the dialogue between Nutrition and Social Sciences, the disciplines already mentioned are constituted in the Political-Pedagogical Plan of the course. In spite of their reduced hours (68 class-hours per year for each discipline) - compared to the hours of those disciplines that have practices and that are of the biological and physiological areas - it is noticeable that the contents developed in the classroom have contributed to expand the students' eyes as they study subjects that help them understand the social, cultural and political aspects of food and nutrition.

It is observed the comprehension of the studied contents - beyond the purely clinical view of Nutrition - in the answers to the questions of the tests, which are always discursive, in the presentations of the works and in the interest of those students who seek to act in research projects, scientific initiation and extension projects. For example, in food education projects with low-income population, projects that involve school feeding, extension project in nutritional information and in the students' own participation or questioning during the classes.

The challenges are present and are observed, above all, at the beginning of the course, that is, in the first year of graduation. Perhaps because they know little about the professional field and the choice of the undergraduate course is always a challenge, most students arrive at the course with the information they find on the internet and in the student guides that help them choose the graduation course.

Thus, one of the greatest challenges is to denaturalize what they mean by food. One way to remedy this challenge is to present at the beginning of the course the notion of culture and cultural relativism. Another is to correlate and contextualize the contents studied in the two disciplines with the current discussions about food and nutrition; and also, with the main focuses of the other disciplines of the curriculum. For example, by highlighting aspects of the Food Socioanthropology and Basic Nutrition disciplines - "You will see about this in a more physiological bias, in the discipline of Basic Nutrition" - or how the disciplines of Socioanthropology and of Applied Psychology to Nutrition comprise, in their approaches, the same theme, such as obesity, anorexia, bulimia. The goal has always been to encourage students to build these bridges.

One of the challenges is to build a Political-Pedagogical Plan based on interdisciplinarity. As the Nutrition Course in the institution from which we report such experience is recent and the Political-Pedagogical Plan will still go through a process of maturation, this experience and the



construction of bridges and links between disciplines are, above all, in the field of interest of each teacher, according to their academic vision and teaching experience.

A bridge that is being made involves the disciplines of Sociology Applied to Nutrition, Scientific Methodology, Food Security and Regional Development and Introduction to Statistics. The students, divided into groups, are invited to address a topic of Nutrition, in the form of an essay and under the guidance of the teachers of the disciplines, so that the approaches of the four disciplines dialogue with each other. The result has been promising and some of these papers have already been presented in panel form at the institution's academic events.

A step towards broadening the interdisciplinarity in the Political-Pedagogical Plans of the Nutrition course came with the publication of the "Food Guide for the Brazilian Population" of 2014, which proposes among many important issues of the clinical area, also the valuation of the cultural social dimensions of the food, including a recommendation from the World Health Organization (WHO). At the beginning of the first chapter of the Food Guide, there is already a call for the principles proposed and these dimensions are highlighted.

Food refers to the intake of nutrients, but also to foods that contain and provide nutrients, how foods are combined and prepared, characteristics of the mode of eating, and the cultural and social dimensions of food practices. All these aspects influence health and well-being. [...]. Finally, specific foods, culinary preparations that result from the combination and preparation of these foods and particular modes of eating constitute an important part of the culture of a society and as such are strongly related to the identity and sense of social belonging of the people, of autonomy, with the pleasure provided by food and, consequently, by its welfare state<sup>17</sup> (p.16-17).

It is important to emphasize that the undergraduate course in Nutrition treated in this experience report started only three years ago. Therefore, it is the portrait of a beginning walk in an attempt to promote the multi and interdisciplinary look in the course worked.

What there is to point out as initial results are promising and stimulating. At the end of the disciplines of Food Anthropology and Sociology applied to Nutrition, students have the opportunity to point out whether they considered important knowledge for Nutrition, or not, and explain why. The answers have been the most varied, but some students have difficulties in correlating the content with the professional performance, which is understandable, considering that such disciplines are offered in the first year (Sociology applied to Nutrition) and in the second (Anthropology of Food). Only in the third year will they do a curricular internship, and in the fourth, the research for graduation work, when such topics may come to the surface in the empirical reality.

As an example, some students' responses signal a maturation and understanding of the sociocultural approach. The answers below show the importance given to cultural relativism and

cultural diversity in the food field. The understanding of culture, alterity, cultural relativism is the first subject worked in both disciplines, as well as food as a social fact and as a social distinction.

*It is important to understand the relationships involved in food, to know the history of discoveries in the food field and in what this influences current eating practices, important for understanding food culture through other looks (Student 1).*

*It helps in the understanding of the patient inserted in their cultural and social environment and, thus, take into account tastes, customs, religiosity and income in the moment of elaborating a diet that has to do with the reality of the patient (Student 2).*

*It is important to understand that in nutritional practice, besides taking into account the energetic need of a patient, we must also consider their customs, preferences and alimentary practices, the condition of access to certain foods, as this will help in the good result of a treatment (Student 3).*

*We should not only consider a person's nutritional need, but also take into account habits, culture, preferences and aversions, socioeconomic status, and thus "read" the person we will attend to in their social and cultural totality (Student 4).*

In the field of research and extension, I have had the opportunity to observe a group of students who act as scholarship holders and/or volunteers in research/extension projects in which I work, where the activities involve coexistence with very peculiar realities in the social and cultural field. For example, one of the projects is about eating habits and eating practices, with groups of women belonging to families in situations of social and economic vulnerability. The application of semi-structured interviews for diagnoses, the analysis of the interviews, their perceptions about the observed reality, are opportunities and moments in which the discussions of the Socio-anthropology of Food disciplines come to the surface, making them understand in practice what is discussed in the contents in class. For example, in this project, they had the opportunity to apply the methodology of the Brazilian Scale of Food and Nutritional Security (EBIA), in addition to a semi-structured interview, to know the food profile and the lifestyle of the women's group. The results pointed to a strongly cultural and social logic, which acts as a way of forming the dietary habits of the investigated group. The content of Socio-anthropology was very important for the students in understanding this situation and how to conduct the food education work with the group.

Such an example has shown us how important is the commitment to maintaining the teaching-research-extension tripod and increasingly gives these spaces to students as a great pedagogical tool that allows them to correlate studies and understand the importance of multi-disciplinarity and inter-disciplinarity, valuing the set of disciplines that compose the curriculum of the Nutrition course. Therefore, we believe that they should even be prescribed as recommendations for undergraduate courses.

It should be noted that the indissociability between teaching, research and extension is even a recommendation of the Brazilian Constitution of 1988<sup>18</sup>, in its Article 207: “The universities enjoy didactic-scientific autonomy, administrative and financial and patrimonial management, and will obey the principle of inseparability between teaching, research and extension “.

## Final Considerations

The conclusion in this brief report of academic experience signals and opens spaces for new reflections necessary to think about the different theoretical approaches related to food and that are relevant to a good formation in the graduation course in Nutrition. Many ways can be opened to broaden the connection between the social sciences and also humanities with the food sciences, among them, to think methodological and analytical innovations, allowing young students to feel stimulated when studying the thematic crosses of the course.

The experience in the disciplines of Food Anthropology and Sociology Applied to Nutrition has been positive and tends to bring fruitful results in the professional conduction. The number of students looking for teachers interested in working on their extension and research projects can be an important signal of advancement and approval of the subjects studied.

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