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Food Empiricism? Deconstructing Subjectivity and Positionality in Dietary Research

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Abstract

This paper explores the methodological challenges in obtaining accurate and reliable data around food and dietary behaviors, especially among women and when combined with social distance between researcher and “subject”. Content of this paper is based on a working chapter of my dissertation, titled, *Women in the Making of Community-based Food Policy: Implications for Latina Health, Citizenship, and Social Capital*. I utilize data on food and diet to assess the severity of food insecurity among Latinas in an urban area of Southern California and to observe coping strategies in response to inadequate access to food. I evaluate different approaches to obtaining this type of data while also deconstructing the notion of research “subject” in what may be interpreted as a very invasive, and thus highly precarious research context. Moreover, I reflect on how my own positionality (as a white, middle-class female associated with the academy) affects and/or obscures which epistememes manifest from the research process. In conclusion, I describe my efforts to employ more participatory methodologies in studying community food security and diet as a means to overcoming some of the dilution of data that occurs in traditional dietary research.

-Correction: error in the title, “cross-cultural”

-Note on slide images (none from own research – awaiting approval for use by human subjects office)

Introduction

Food has become an increasingly popular object of inquiry for analyzing power relations in capitalist society (e.g., Bestor, Freidberg, Mintz). Food insecurity and hunger, perhaps more than any other global phenomenon, reveal how inequalities stemming from the political economic sphere are transcribed onto bodies. Dietary research provides a baseline for understanding social stratification along the food chain and a window to the lived experience of the most nutritionally disadvantaged.

Food insecurity is defined in the US as lack of enough food to meet basic needs (Wunderlich and Norwood 2006). The state of food insecurity in the US has continued to worsen; in 2009, 14.7 percent of US households were food insecure

(Nord, Andrews et al. 2010). Consistently, Latinas have been disproportionately affected by this national problem (Nord, Andrews et al. 2010). My research focuses on how Latinas perceive their own participation in the urban food environment in areas of southern California, how this participation interacts with notions of citizenship and social capital among Latinas, and the implications of these potentially precarious forms of citizenship for health, families, and social networks.

Dietary Methods

To date, there is no perfect formula or standalone method for obtaining accurate and reliable data on dietary behavior. Sound dietary research as argued by nutritional anthropologists, relies on a combination of methods for measuring food intake, nutritional knowledge, etc. For the specific purposes of this paper, I will not discuss the entire range of methods from nutritional anthropology, which also includes time-motion analysis, anthropometry, and balance studies, but rather I will focus my discussion around the advantages and critiques of methods that have been most influential for cultural anthropologists.

The *24-hour Recall* asks study participants to recall items consumed in the past day, *Food Frequency Surveys* probe participants for a list of regularly consumed foods, and *Food Diaries* require participants to manage a personal log of food habits. While recalls and surveys tend to elicit high cooperation, neither controls for memory of participants or variation in diet during different times of the year, and there are often inconsistencies between these methods. Diaries may reduce strain for the researcher, but fail in eliciting high cooperation in that much responsibility is placed on participants. Nutritional anthropologists recommend conducting

participant observation with emphasis on food procurement and preparation times in combination with any of the above-listed methods, yet participants often perceive the presence of a researcher at these times as invasive (Himmelgreen and Crooks 2005; Bernard 2006). The challenge for researchers becomes a matter of developing rapport with participants, meeting with participants at regular intervals to revisit past methods, and interacting with participants in different research contexts (i.e., informal and formal interviews, focus groups). Such research is also biased toward evidence based on empirical knowledge, placing less value and precedence on sensory-logic (Abarca 2006).

Overview of Fieldwork

The following analysis is based on my dissertation fieldwork with 25 low-income, Latinas in Santa Barbara. Women in my study range in age from 23 to 62, work part- or full-time in service industries, namely house cleaning, claim Mexican citizenship (with only a few exceptions), and prefer Spanish as a primary language for social interactions (with only one exception). All of the women in my study are mothers to multiple children, many of who are living estranged from family across the border. Over the span of 12 months, I am conducting: participant observation at community events, in households, and at local food-centered venues to which these women frequent; measurements and comparisons of household food security; life history interviews; interviews with representatives from food assistance programs and community organizations that interact with these women; and finally, focus groups and participatory scenario-planning with these women regarding preferred changes to the urban food environment.

Prior to initiating this research, I contemplated extensively my own positionality in terms of questioning my research motives, weighing the advantages and disadvantages of being an outsider to my study population, and leveling control over the research process. However, I also did not want a discourse on positionality to override the rest of the research. For readers of anthropology, there is a struggle within the ethnographic text to discern the anthropological narrative from that of the interlocutor. While post-modern narratives have attempted to transcend this struggle by making further evident the voice of the anthropologist, such narratives may also be critiqued for overemphasizing the researcher/anthropologist. These narratives may falsely downplay the lived reality of peoples while introducing the anthropologist as the new “subject.”

Similar to Hurtado’s (1989) observation that “the American state has intervened constantly in the private lives and domestic arrangements of the working class,” (849), social scientists in the US have oversaturated disenfranchised groups with research questions and interventions to address perceived problems, meanwhile, comparatively less research is conducted on white households. Hurtado attributes this difference to respect for the “privacy” of whites, explaining, “There is no such thing as a private sphere for people of Color except that which they manage to create and protect in an otherwise hostile environment,” (849). Does she suggest that scholars (as agents of the state) do not recognize the privacy of other groups? A reading of Hurtado brings to surface many questions regarding the implications of being a female scholar conducting research and/or serving as an agent for a predominantly patriarchal bureaucracy (the University and government). Hurtado

describes how, “The patriarchal invitation to power is only a pretended choice for white women because, as in all cases of tokens, their inclusion is dependent on complete and constant submission,” (Hurtado:845). To compare with a historical example, Stoller cites that “[European] women were not detriments to colonial relations but crucial to bolstering a failing empire and to maintaining the daily rituals of racialized rule,” (2002:56); does the white, female researcher serve as an agent to similar racial projects?

As an alternative to a trajectory of power that prioritizes misogynist, colonial, and imperial ends, participatory research is mindful of outcomes for all participants during and after the research process by considering the phrasing of questions, framing of research context, and benefits to parties.

Preliminary Results

Lack of adequate access to healthy, affordable foods along with other destabilizing conditions – new foods in the supermarket, high food prices, language barriers – complicate food matters for immigrants, particularly those recently settled. Diet-related health disorders occur disproportionately among Latina/o populations; Latinas/os display a high propensity for obesity and have overall higher levels of blood glucose, cholesterol, and triglycerides than Anglos rendering them more at risk for type II diabetes mellitus (Velez-Ibanez 1996). Many studies have also linked mental health issues to food insecurity, including depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (Siefert, Heflin et al. 2001; Casey, Goolsby et al. 2004; Laraia, Siega-Riz et al. 2006; Gundersen, Lohman et al. 2008; Huddlestone-Casas, Charnigo et al. 2009). Lighthall (2001) observed trends among farm workers that

also resonate with low-income, urban women: “the work demands, leading to lack of time to obtain and cook nutritious food, together with poor dietary habits and seasonal unemployment,” are cause for serious diet-related health problems. Longer residency in the US, particularly for Latino populations, is associated with less healthy behaviors and health outcomes, including higher BMIs and obesity (Abraido-Lanza, Chao et al. 2005; Himmelgreen, Bretnall et al. 2005; Perez-Escamilla and Putnik 2007). The following anecdotes highlight some of the circumstances faced by low-income Latinas that often constrain and shape dietary behaviors.¹

Four families live together under the same roof in Beatriz’ household and they help each other – “cooperamos todos” – by pooling financial resources to share expenses, including food. Not everyone in her household is related; Beatriz has four children (ranging in ages from early twenties to mid thirties) that came to the US with her 9 years ago, following her husband’s move to find work. Her husband is a dishwasher; Beatriz tends to domestic chores. On any given day, Beatriz does the grocery shopping and prepares meals for everyone in the household. Beatriz and her daughter report eating only one meal a day because they cannot afford more. Beatriz’ family is from Guerrero; they came to the US because their town was very poor. She reports regular instances of hunger, reduced food intake, and unbalanced diets in their household, even among the children. Beatriz has a few grandchildren that also live with her. Often they have “solo frijoles...y arroz” to feed the children. She said that it is especially difficult to eat around the time that rent is due – every

¹ Actual names of study participants have been changed for the purposes of this paper.

4th or 5th of the month. Beatriz has diabetes but like many other women in my research, she does not have Medical or any health insurance. She has to pay out of pocket for any doctor visits.

Rosalinda had to leave Guerrero because she had nothing to eat and she was very desperate. Moreover, life was difficult without her husband around. Her son was only 9 months when his father left for the US. While her husband would send them some money and they would talk on the phone “cada ocho dias”, they still missed him. Everyone Rosalinda knew in Mexico swore that she would gain weight – *engordar* – when she got to the US, but she has always walked everywhere so she has avoided gaining weight. She has sometimes felt melancholy, especially when she first arrived, but overall she says life “es tranquilo”. Rosalinda does not receive any federal food assistance. Only her youngest child is a US citizen and thus eligible for Medical. Her older son is not eligible and thus they must pay out of pocket for any of his health care. Public forms of food assistance are that much more important to Rosalinda’s household. She described food bank provisions as “las cosas que nos faltan en casa”. She discovered the program walking by one day. At first she thought they were selling food but soon she asked some people in line and learned that the food was free.

Conclusions

Phillips (2006) argues that as anthropologists we can make important contributions to policy by demonstrating how markers of difference “are drawn into service for new border-making projects that systematically exclude some people, and not others, from healthy food” (47). I would argue that Phillip’s use of “borders”

in the food system overlaps with other notions of “the border” in highly racialized and gendered ways. In continuing with this research, I seek ways to circumvent such exclusionary practices through revealing the lived experience of marginalized groups for lasting food system reform.

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