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Dimensions of human nutrition

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Abstract. The food literature, encompassing historical, bioethical, anthropological, psychological and sociological contributions, appears to be vast, even though the various psychological and social implications of human eating behavior rarely come up in everyday life and are often taken for granted unchecked in their assumptions. One need only think of one's daily life to realize that food is not just an object to be consumed and subjected to dietary or qualitative analysis but has a cultural, symbolic and relational character that goes beyond its mere nutritional value and the human need to eat. For this reason, food practices are worthy of cultural analysis, discussion and interpretation. Nutrition is one of the significant issues of our time, and food should rightly be considered the most important issue for humanity. It is almost always the most critical factor for most people.

Key words: Food, nutrition

It is not easy to give a single, all-encompassing definition of food. The need for food seems to be the most primitive and instinctive of all, yet it is highly complex and multi-layered. Eating is an act that shapes all behaviors: work, sport, leisure, and celebration; every situation has its expression in food. This can be seen, for example, in the use of food as a sign of rites of passage, the change of seasons or the different uses on holidays. Food is not only a consumed product but also a communication system, a collection of images and a record of uses, situations and behaviors (1). It is, therefore, possible to approach its meaning, and thus our relationship to it, by looking at it from three perspectives that influence and complement each other, shedding light on the biological, cultural and symbolic dimensions: Nutritional Science, Hedonism and Bioethics. The nutritional perspective views food from a biological point of view as purely functional for the survival and health of the body: food choices should be understood in this sense, and the main property of food is to influence health. While this view confirms an apparent reality, it is insufficient to understand the complexity of the meaning of food. The sociocultural environment even generates the phenomena of hunger, taste and food preferences. The mechanics of digestion depend on mental dispositions arising from habits, perceptions, beliefs and prejudices regarding the quality and taste of food, which must therefore be taken into account.

The hedonistic perspective, on the other hand, emphasizes the appetitive and pleasurable aspects of eating, which are not only due to the taste of the food, but also to the aesthetic, evocative and imaginative element inherent in the visual presentation of the dish and the smell and texture of the food; to enjoy it, it is not enough to have a good taste, but the other sensory modalities are also needed: touch, smell, sight. Eating becomes an art form when the aesthetic aspect precedes nutritional needs (2). The same aspect is emphasized when food enters advertising and mass production, influencing people's tastes more and more until it gradually becomes part of the entertainment

industry. However, the hedonistic element of eating is linked to the voluptuous element of well-being and pleasure and its social implications. Some examples that illustrate this point of view concern the difference in meaning and feeling one has when eating in a company rather than in solitude; or the emotions aroused by the entirely subjective connection between food and a pleasurable or shared experience, e.g. the coffee break, where coffee is symbolically felt as a circumstance rather than a drink. Finally, the bioethical perspective sheds light on the moral aspect of eating (3). Anthropologists point out that for many primitive people, eating represented communion with the sacred. Even in modern times, many rituals, ceremonies and festivals involve a relationship with food that represents a primary and universal aspect of the human dimension. Food that is permitted according to this view thus acquires a symbolic and metaphysical status that stands for social and moral values (4).

The question of artificial nutrition and hydration, in particular, presents a dilemma regarding whether to start or stop (5-7). Such a decision is much more straightforward if the patient is well-informed and capable of judgement, and insightful (8, 9). The decision becomes more complicated when the patient is in a critical condition, suffers from multiple diseases, has limited cognitive abilities, may be very old and is in the last phase of life (10). The three perspectives presented are present together and converge in the current constellation of meaning that food assumes for humans (11). They influence each other and mediate between them on a more or less unconscious level, depending on their priorities and on the phase of life they are in, to the point of constructing their own personal and variable meaning of food, which can also be analyzed through another dimension that looks at it from individual and collective, psychological and social points of view.

The social, ritual and emotional dimension of eating is particularly evident in the family context. The meal plays a fundamental role in the construction of the family, emotional relationships and power relations within the family, as well as in the acquisition of the rules of civilized behavior (12). Each family establishes a more or less regular pattern of meals: allocation of places, meal times, meals for children and adults, holidays and days of the week, etc. (13). The arrangement of meals is also precisely regulated: Main and side meals, characteristics of courses, more or less complexity and formality. The same meal takes on a different meaning depending on the more or less structured moment when it is consumed - snack, lunch, exceptional event - and the food served on festive occasions is often highly ritualized and accompanied by a strong emotional dimension. In this way, through the highly normative structure of the meal, children internalize the rules and values of cleanliness, respect for others and sharing (14). Mealtime is involved in defining roles, first in the family and then, as a logical extension, in society, and is also the means through which these relationships are expressed. Eating, cooking and table manners are culturally determined and place the individual in a culturally ordered social universe. In the family context, eating habits and behavior develop in early childhood. Preferences in food choices are necessary as a sign of identity, as a basis for negotiation within the family and as an element to underline the existence of hierarchies, conflicts or harmony. In this sense, the refusal of food - from the adolescent's attempt to assert himself against his parents by refusing the food generally eaten in the family to the pathology of anorexia - can take on a particular meaning of rebellion, contestation or rejection; the autonomous choice of food is often associated with early adulthood and the achievement of independence. On the other hand, sharing food has a critical relational component, creating emotional and affective involvement and strengthening bonds: food can be seen as a gift and metaphorically represents the love and identity of the giver. Moments such as dinner or certain recurring events such as feasts are characterized by a series of gestures and practices repeated over time, to the point of building authentic rituals that are important insofar as they evoke values, strengthen cohesion and intimacy, and enable the recognition of identity.

These reflections on the family, when placed from a historical perspective, reveal a broader value of a social and collective nature: the way of eating derives from the context to which the subject belongs, revealing at the same time gender, social background, age, moral and social values (15). From this point of view,

not only the meaning of a particular food is essential, but also the way it is prepared and eaten: eating habits and behaviors that are considered different, strange and vulgar can play a crucial role in distinguishing oneself or one's cultural group from others in a more or less stereotypical way, and they are an essential part of how others view people and construct a self-image. Every culture and subculture have criteria for what is edible and what combinations are allowed. The reactions of rejection or disgust when confronted with the violation of traditional norms or food taboos when immersed in other cultures or adverse situations (e.g., cannibalism) show how profound the internalization of food norms is. Consequently, eating behavior unites those who share it and reinforces group identity while at the same time separating and demarcating them from all others, highlighting differences between groups, cultures and social classes, and erecting ideological, ethnic, political, religious and social barriers. This is also evident in migration processes, where the retention of eating habits serves to keep alive the memory and identity of the country of origin and is usually the last trace of one's origins when everything else has disappeared. In a reverse and complementary way, food can also forge a bond between people. Thus, giving or sharing food has always been important in social relations in any society and rites of hospitality, and is one of the first and most used means of establishing relationships, learning about other cultures and developing interculturality. The communion of food manifests and builds social bonds and strengthens group cohesion and solidarity, while even in a social context, the rejection of food can be a profound challenge to existing norms. Moving from the collective to the individual level, we can see that food and nutrition are fundamental not only from a biological point of view (since through the intake of food, we become what we eat) but also from a cultural point of view for subjectivity and self-awareness. The way we eat is closely linked to who we are and is considered a private and public representation of ourselves, as it plays a role in satisfying intimate and personal needs and outwardly constructing a social image (16). Food preferences emerge soon after birth but are also influenced by genetic aspects. Later, the association with unpleasant or pleasant biological, psychological and social situations influences and changes our initial predispositions: think of the foods typically consumed at festivals. In this way, eating habits and preferences lead one to eat foods that are not only pleasant but also considered culturally appropriate, that symbolically reveal one's identity to oneself and others, and that express many aspects of one's personality related to memories or the way one relates to others. Food can have to do with all aspects of personality: how one eats and the type and amount of food one eats can be considered expressive behavior and reveal certain character traits. Such habits thus develop into personality traits. For example, regarding the importance of appearance and discipline in our society, bodies also become symbols of how well the people who inhabit them manage to control them: an overweight body betrays a lack of self-discipline. In contrast, a fit body expresses the ability to control oneself and one's emotional reactions. There is also a complex relationship between recognizing the need for food and one's emotional state: it is common to use food to relieve anxiety, to think of comfort foods, foods that are encouraging and evoke warmth and nostalgia, just as conversely, certain states of mind can lead to loss of appetite or obsessive behavior.

In summary, there is hardly any social activity or critical emotional state in which food plays a minor role, and there are many in which it is of fundamental importance. As an expression and mediator of ethnic, social, religious, philosophical, personal and gender (17-20) identity, food can be compared to a communication system such as language: both represent communication codes that convey moral, symbolic values and meanings of various kinds within and outside the societies they express. The crucial concept derived from this is that food has a robust identity and socio-relational meaning at the individual, family and social levels (21,22). The diversity of subjectivities, contexts and lived experiences highlight the mutability and complexity of the symbolic meanings surrounding food (23,24).

Conflict of Interest: Each author declares that he or she has no commercial associations (e.g. consultancies, stock ownership, equity interest, patent/licensing arrangement etc.) that might pose a conflict of interest in connection with the submitted article

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