

“Culture is as much part of nutrition as are biology, biochemistry, chemistry and genes”



Welcome

Culture: A Key Dimension of Nutrition

In the era of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, there is a renewed focus on food choices and the impact these can have on our environment and our health. The challenge for our global community is to find sustainably efficient ways to feed nutritious foods to a growing population that is increasingly urban and reliant on food markets. Guiding food choices towards healthy, sustainable diets for nine billion people, billions of whom are consumers, would seem a good place to start. In fact, you will find that the nutrition-sensitive literature has featured the word consumer (defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “someone who buys goods or services for personal use”) quite prominently in its conceptual models (see the Global Panel on Agriculture and Food Systems for Nutrition 2016 report, page 27, [Figure 1.4](#)),¹ and scientists are advocating for consumer-centered policy design.² I hope this signals a move towards consumer-focused (rather than expert-driven) work, with funding dollars to encourage research into consumer decision-making around food, especially in low- and middle-income countries.

The complexity of consumer choice

Consumer food choices, however, are anything but straightforward. Governments play a critical role in shaping food systems, especially in defining what is available and affordable, and people are constantly negotiating food choices. Some of the more notable criteria whereby we negotiate these choices across diverse eating contexts are time, cost, convenience,³ taste, values, social expectations, and knowledge.⁴ This long list of factors indicates that food choice is about the attributes of foods (e.g., healthy/unhealthy, salty/sweet) as well as about food experiences (eating and social factors). The food experience is apparent in our procurement experience – in the wet and dry markets, grocery stores and small shops that consumers visit; in our meal preparation and eating experiences, such as where we prepare foods, with whom and for whom, and who is present at meals; and in the contexts (i.e., home, at work, at school, in restaurants or at street food stalls) in which these meals are consumed.

For this issue on food and culture, we have curated contributions that explore the social and cultural domains of food choices and food experiences more broadly. We acknowledge that this is only part of the story. We promise to explore cognition (psychology, brain) and biology (evolution, genes, biochemistry) – factors that also drive food choices – in a future issue of the magazine. For some of our readers trained in biology or chemistry, culture may seem a fuzzy, perhaps non-scientific topic. Be assured, however, that culture is as much part of nutrition as are biology, biochemistry, chemistry and genes, and there is a rich body of research on nutrition and culture. I invite you to explore this issue of *Sight and Life* with a curious mind, with a view to learning more about how a cultural perspective can enrich your nutrition research and programs.

Food, culture, and nutrition science

The Oxford English Dictionary defines culture as the beliefs, values, practices, social forms, and material traits of social groups.⁵ So when we speak of food and culture or of food culture, what we are examining are the *shared* values, beliefs, and practices that guide the food choices of a group of people. The cultural perspective is especially useful when seeking to understand the multiple factors that affect eating, such as food availability, food purchases, meal preparation or meal selection, and the eating environment. As the late Professor Hans Rosling said, “scientists want to do good, but the problem is that they don’t understand the world.”⁶

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“Food culture is about shared values, beliefs, and practices”

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I would like to thank all our contributors, who have very generously shared their insights and research in these pages. For a broad overview of perspectives in nutrition culture, I suggest you first turn to page 32, where Prof. Edward F Fischer discusses the ways in which food expresses our identity, values, and be-

liefs. For a classic example of how cultural research (and ethnography, in particular) can generate valuable insights, I encourage you to read Prof. Fischer's book *The Good Life: Aspiration, dignity and the anthropology of well-being*, which is reviewed by Jonathan Steffen on page 110.

For examples of how the biocultural framework and ethnographic research have been applied to infant and young children, I invite you to turn to page 46. Here Dr Gretel Pelto and I focus on how mother-infant dyad relationship offers a broad perspective for understanding food choices for infants and young children.

In this issue, we focus on topics that drew on "consumer research", "formative research", and "social marketing" as ways of studying or addressing values and beliefs on food choices and food practices (see [Table on page 10](#) for definitions). In the broader context of understanding consumer decisions around food and eating experiences, we feature two articles. Yanna Manuk and collaborators use a social marketing approach to examine the motivations and values that drive choices for the use of micronutrient powders in Sudan. Meanwhile, Adrienne Claremont examines the food purchasing and consumption behaviors of Haitian women on foods for their young children. And to learn how the SUN Business Network is using consumer research to encourage the development of healthier food options, read Dr Hannah Theobald's piece on page 40.

Our field report section offers examples of how to apply ethnographical research methods in order to improve food practices. On page 93 we have used ethnography to develop a WASH and nutrition intervention in schools in India. On page 90, we feature how studying shopping and eating experiences will help a microfranchising endeavor in South Africa sell its fortified food products. I am also pleased to feature two reports on innovative technology that supports healthy eating habits. On page 83 there is a report from AeroFarms on their game-changing innovation for growing green leafy vegetables in urban areas; and on page 86, read about Medic Mobile's platform to empower front-line workers.

We hope you will enjoy this new issue of *Sight and Life* magazine and, as ever, look forward to your feedback and your suggestions for future issues.

Warm regards,



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The many synonyms of “food choices”

Delve into the topic of diet and you are likely to find terms closely associated with “food choices”. For example, “food consumption patterns”, “dietary patterns”, “food practices”, “food intake patterns”, “food habits”, and “dietary habits”. All are used interchangeably with each other and sometimes with *food choices*. Although they are related, it is helpful to distinguish between the terms “habit” and “practice”, especially with reference to the sociocultural perspective.^{1,a}

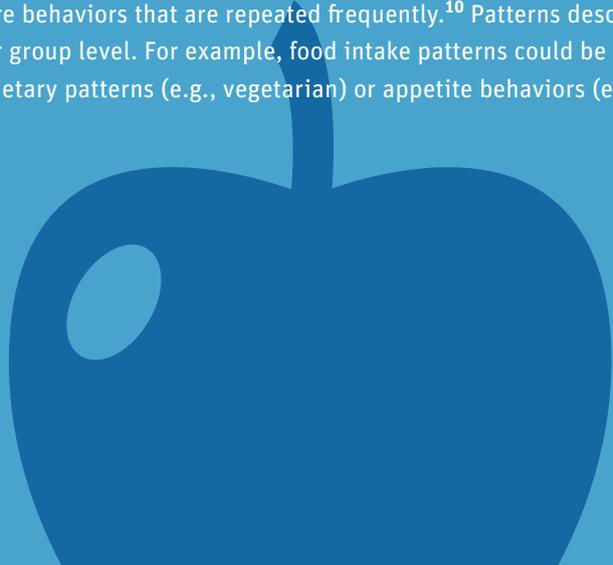
Habits – also called food culture or food ways. Food habits deal broadly with how food is obtained, distributed, prepared and combined, who serves it, when it is eaten (meal times) and who eats the food, and ultimately what is consumed.^{1,2} Food habits are synonymous with food consumption patterns or dietary patterns.

Practices – are a collection of behaviors specific to a category (e.g., meal preparation practices, food hygiene practices, healthy eating practices, maternal care practices). Behaviors are observable actions.³ Food choices are likewise observable actions (behaviors).

Food habits are broader than practices and food choices. Habits refer to cultural and social aspects of food, largely occurring at the macro-levels (community, region, national, ethnic groups, religious groups). Practices are more specific and variable, occurring at the level of the individual or of smaller groups. For example, you might find different types of food practices within one community. We often talk about household food practices, with some families having healthier practices than others.

If your head isn’t spinning yet, then there are the labels used to describe food choice research or food choice programs – which makes navigating this space a bit confusing. In the **Table** on page 10, we define the labels one is most likely to encounter when reading published literature on “food choice” in nutrition. Also, you will note that some labels are better suited for studying or changing food habits and food patterns, while others concern behaviors and practices.

Note: ^a If one draws on the behavioral or cognitive sciences, habits and patterns have different connotations. Habits are behaviors that are repeated frequently.¹⁰ Patterns describe recurrent behavior categories (or habits) at the individual or group level. For example, food intake patterns could be used to describe meal patterns (e.g., skipping breakfast), dietary patterns (e.g., vegetarian) or appetite behaviors (e.g., picky eating).



Selected labels used in food choice research

Social Marketing

is an approach to studying and designing goods and services.⁴ It is the application of marketing principles (audience insight and consumer research, audience segmentation, marketing mix) and marketing techniques to promote behaviors that will improve health or wellbeing.

Behavior Change Communication (BCC)

is a term that describes an “evidence- and research-based process of using **communication** to **promote behaviors** that lead to improvements in health outcomes. With BCC, the focus is largely on the individual who enacts the behavior.”⁵

Social and Behavior Change Communication (SBCC)

is a term that describes a “research-based, consultative process that uses **communication** to promote and facilitate **behavior change** and support the requisite **social change** for the purpose of improving health outcomes.”⁵ SBCC draws on all levels of the social ecology theory: individual level, families and communities, as well as the social and cultural environments that enable social change.

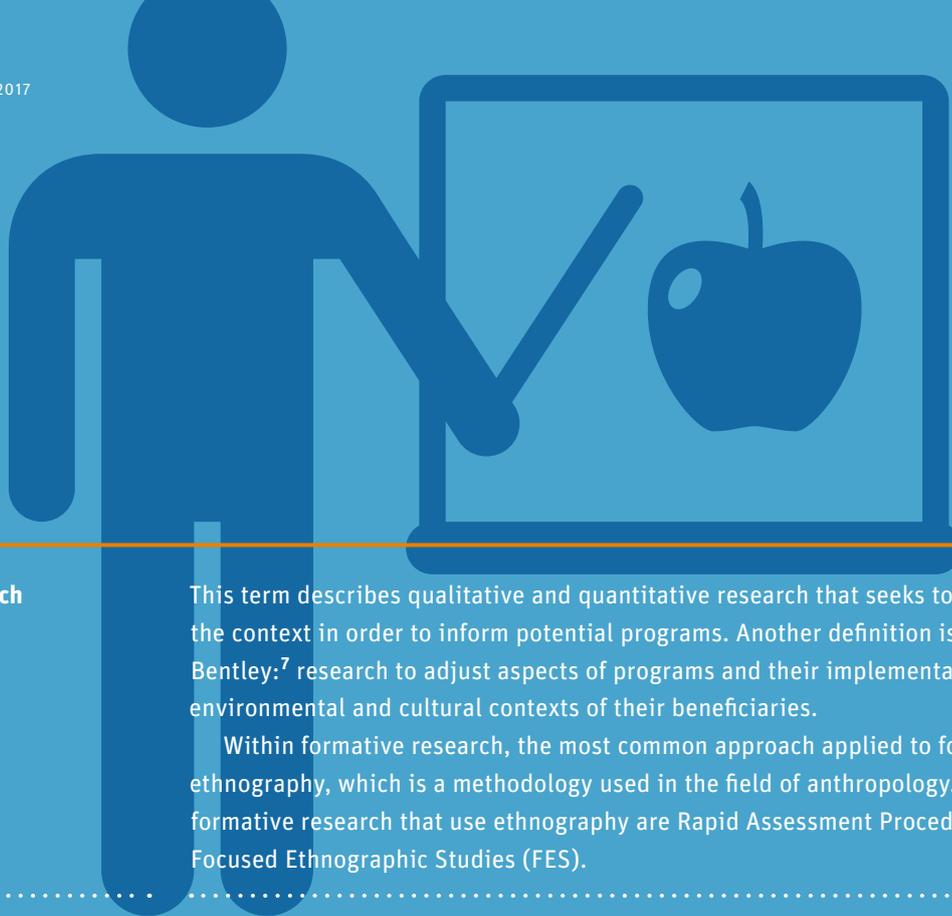
Human-Centered Design

is an approach to “design **with** communities, to deeply understand the people they’re looking to serve, to dream up scores of ideas, and to create innovative new solutions rooted in people’s actual needs.”⁶

Consumer Research

Research that uses qualitative and quantitative methods to understand the needs, motivations, and desires of consumers who are purchasing (or using) goods or services.





Formative Research

This term describes qualitative and quantitative research that seeks to understand the context in order to inform potential programs. Another definition is provided by Bentley:⁷ research to adjust aspects of programs and their implementation to the environmental and cultural contexts of their beneficiaries.

Within formative research, the most common approach applied to food choice is ethnography, which is a methodology used in the field of anthropology. The types of formative research that use ethnography are Rapid Assessment Procedures (RAP) or Focused Ethnographic Studies (FES).

Behavioral Economics

A field of study that applies psychological insights to explain judgments and decision-making in the areas of finances, healthy eating, and other practices. Behavioral economics is based on the premise that human beings are non-rational actors, and that to make judgments and take decisions, we rely on **heuristics** (mental short-cuts) and are influenced by **biases**.⁸

Nutrition Education

is a subfield of nutrition, one that uses various strategies “that not only provide information and skills, but also foster motivation, growth and change. Nutrition education encourages critical thinking and reflection.”³ Within nutrition education there are various strategies (i.e., counseling, peer education, adult learning principles) that can be used to encourage changes in food practices.

Health Promotion

According to WHO, health promotion is not focused on the individual but on the social and environmental changes that are required to achieve health.⁹ For example, health promotion policy would look at improving wages, making public transport to markets more accessible, and introducing taxes or subsidies to support healthy food choices.

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