

BALANCED DIETS: ANALYZING RESTRICTIVE EUROCENTRISM IN NUTRITION STANDARDS

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ABSTRACT

The foundations of nutrition science and the conception of dietary perfection have been fundamentally based on Eurocentric ideals, colonization and a lack of acknowledgment of indigenous knowledge. New trends of healthy diets, ranging from lactose free, gluten free and vegan diets, all do not take into account the various dietary needs of different cultures. European or Western metabolism is different from that in South Asia, or the Far East. Therefore, developing a binary in terms of 'good' and 'bad' food has adverse implications when the dietary needs of different cultures and indigenous populations are not accounted for. This paper will analyze such restrictive Eurocentrism in nutrition standards, and undertake a comparative analysis of food standards globally. The paper will also address the hidden subjectivities and biases that exist in the research efforts and policy creation, as well as the weaknesses of critiques such as nutritional primitivism. The paper will then pose recommendations for a more culturally sensitive understanding of nutrition science and its positive implications for nutrition counselling.

Keywords: Nutrition, Diet, Superfood, Health, Food culture, Nature

INTRODUCTION

There have been attempts over decades to develop standards for dietary perfection and ideal, balanced diet. This has evolved as our understanding of the human body has developed, as well as emerging health risks such as obesity, increased uses of processed food and preservatives, and the needs of different individuals such as allergies, physical constitution, and other medical factors. The concept of dietary perfection has evolved and changed repeatedly and is therefore, a paradox in itself, as it differs based on geography, cultural, climate, temperatures, and other such factors.

The trend for novel and exotic “superfoods” exemplifies the contemporary tendency to idealize “primitive” food cultures as nutritional utopias (Loyer and Knight, 2018). “Nutritional primitivism” has blossomed in superfoods discourse and marketing since the 1980s, evolving into a knowledge framework for evaluating a food’s healthfulness that challenges nutrition science (Loyer and Knight, 2018). Nutritional primitivism emerges not only in response to a perceived crisis in Western health, but also social and environmental concerns about globalized and industrialized agri-food systems. However, primitivist representations of superfoods essentialize producers and production practices as traditional and timeless, obscuring their complex and changing reality (Loyer and Knight, 2018; Knight, 2008). While nutritional primitivism can be understood as a popular critique of contemporary food systems and their underlying social structures, these incipient critiques thus fall short on key issues of food sovereignty (Loyer and Knight, 2018; Knight, 2008).

Further, the current idea of health eating does not reflect different cultures, immigrants and those with different ideas of what healthy food means (Melton, 2018). Therefore, while nutritional primitivism is being adopted as a marketing tool, nutritional standards themselves continue to remain restrictively Eurocentric (Loyer and Knight, 2018). Such a conception affects advice given to patients on their dietary needs, and further, it preserves the idea that Eurocentric culture is superior to and creates a binary of good and bad which is false, and reinforces the worst parts of diet culture (Melton, 2018).

This paper will trace how nutritional standards and the conception of a balanced and healthy diet came to be Eurocentric and excluded other cultures and indigenous diets. Nutrition science currently has no accepted means of collectively attending to hidden subjectivities embedded within its methods and practice. This paper will elaborate upon the need to pay close attention to these hidden subjectivities, and recommendations for increasing research into nutritional primitivism, indigenous food and nutritional value, and the cultural and class limitations that arise with a purely Western understanding of a healthy diet.

BACKGROUND

European culture gave birth to modern science as a means to investigate and explain the natural world. The biomedical disciplines that have since emerged, including nutrition, presuppose a web of basic presuppositions, background assumptions and implicit cultural values that are often overlooked and escape peer review (Hassler, 2014; Lemke and Delormier, 2017). These "hidden subjectivities" are widely taken-for-granted while exerting a powerful hold on the scope, direction and patterns of disciplinary thought. The realm of hidden subjectivity is important because these ideas hold significant power in governing thought within a scientific community

(Hassler, 2014). It follows that explicit discussion of implicit mental models and taken-for-granted presuppositions offers both opportunities and challenges for a scientific discipline (Hassler, 2014).

In nutrition science, the hidden subjectivities that proved so successful in ameliorating acute deficiency diseases were re-directed largely intact toward diet-related chronic diseases of a quite different nature (Hassler, 2014). It is possible that over-attachment to a scientific mindset that proved so successful with acute deficiency diseases might in some ways actually represent an obstacle to success as our attention has shifted to the newer challenges of a more complex, systemic and chronic nature (Hassler, 2014). Therefore, it is important from a research standpoint to study culturally diverse concepts of balanced diets, and by extension, the subjective standards of what is considered 'healthy' in different regions, cultures and climates.

The new trend of restrictive diets, such as 'lactose-free' and 'gluten free' diets also therefore, have their origins in Eurocentric notions of nutrition science. Further, there are inherent class limitations and an automatic process of stratification that occurs with these healthier diets, which are only available to people in a higher socio economic status, and often of white, western and non-immigrant or non-indigenous origin. Research has suggested that the evolution of these notions also arose through the process of colonization (Hassler et al, 2019). Before the colonization of the Americas by European settlers, Indigenous Peoples had complex food systems and excellent health. Indigenous Peoples of North America found useful purpose for almost 4000 different kinds of plants (Hassler et al, 2019; Hassler, 2014). Yet these contributions of Indigenous Peoples are seldom recognized or recounted in food, nutrition, and health disciplines. Even less attention is given to the systems of human knowledge giving rise to these contributions (Hassler et al, 2019). It would appear that professional training in the food, nutrition, agriculture, and public health disciplines can lead its future professionals to hold so tightly to Euro-Western scientific mental models that little consideration is given to knowledge systems of Indigenous Peoples (Hassler et al, 2019).

The livelihoods, food and nutrition security, health, and cultural and spiritual heritage of many Indigenous Peoples are tied to their relationship with land (Lemke and Delormier, 2017). Access to land and other natural resources therefore has been, and is, the central issue for Indigenous Peoples, yet interference by state and corporate actors continues to dispossess Indigenous Peoples of their lands and self-determination, violating their right to adequate food and nutrition (Lemke and Delormier, 2017). Therefore, it is apparent that colonizing patterns continue to echo subconsciously within the web of foundational assumptions and mental models that govern scientific and professional practice (Lemke and Delormier, 2017).

The major issue that arises upon reviewing the body of medical literature regarding indigenous food habits and different cultural conceptions of a healthy diet, are structural and systemic barriers to Indigenous scholar participation within professional food, nutrition, and health programs (Hassel et al, 2019). A decolonized approach to research is crucial to developing an understanding of how other cultures are excluded in this domain (Hassel et al, 2019).

This also has long term implications for nutrition counselling, which has become increasingly important as more people develop health problems in relation to processed food (Melton, 2018). Teaching a patient about healthier eating must not become about making fitting the patient's culture into a Eurocentric diet (Melton, 2018). It should be about having a deep understanding of the way patients eat, both on a daily basis and at special occasions, how they cook, their practices around preparing and serving food, and any other details about their diets, and counseling them to reach whatever their goals are with all those things in mind, and incorporated into the advice given to them in a culturally sensitive and respectful manner (Melton, 2018).

DISCUSSION

To adequately address the hidden subjectivities that exist in determining a balance and ethical diet, consciously addressing "disciplinary blind spots" is a priority for decolonizing work (Hassel et al, 2019). This includes inquiry into the background assumptions and mental models that govern the process of professionalization (Hassel et al, 2019). The Euro-Western cultural grounding and orientations that are foundational to most academic disciplines, including nutrition sciences, are seldom explicitly recognized and even less often become subject matter for accepted disciplinary discourse (Hassel et al, 2019).

A descriptive global review of current food-based dietary guidelines (FBDG) revealed that although all FBDG incorporate sociocultural factors to some extent, greater attention in some FBDG could be paid to socioeconomic equity, inclusion of indigenous groups (e.g., through food examples commonly consumed), and greater attention to the nutrition transition and the rise in consumption of ultra processed or "junk" foods (Herforth et al, 2019). It was suggested that to accurately account for cultural variations and reflecting existing standards in medicine (for eg, vitamin balance and fat intake), regional guidelines could be a stepping stone between global and national FBDG in terms of facilitating both the FBDG process and comparisons of the cost or consumption of recommended diets across countries (Herforth et al, 2019).

There is some relatively simple guidance common to most FBDG: to consume fruits and vegetables and starchy staples as the bulk of the diet; to include ASF and legumes; to limit salt, sugar, and fat; and to consume a diversity of types of food in appropriate proportions (Herforth et al, 2019). Clearer parameters on ASF (including dairy, eggs, meat, and fish) and fats/oils are

needed from the global-authority level, for countries to adopt and adapt to their food cultures (Herforth et al, 2019). FBDG development and revision warrants increased attention to ecological impacts of diets and guidance incorporating sustainability; and enhanced handling of sociocultural factors including economic disparities, rapid dietary transitions toward junk/ultraprocessed food consumption, and differences in dietary patterns of social minority groups such as indigenous peoples (Herforth et al, 2019). At the same time as FBDG are better tailored to individual populations, further global recommendations around healthy and sustainable diets would be helpful for use and adaptation in country-level FBDG, and for monitoring key aspects of diet quality across countries and globally (Herforth et al, 2019).

There is a growing recognition of the need to change current dietary patterns and of the value of traditional foodways (Milburn, 2004). The Center for Indigenous Peoples' Nutrition and Environment, based at McGill University in Montreal, is a research and education resource for Indigenous People created by Canada's Aboriginal Leaders to support traditional nutrition and study the safety of traditional foods, which often have been contaminated by chemical toxins (Milburn, 2004). In the United States community-based traditional nutrition projects and regional and national conferences are focused on the problem of diet-related disease and the need to regain traditional foodways (Milburn, 2004).

The knowledge of indigenous peoples is usually considered "unscientific", and therefore, has been blocked from mainstream nutrition science. Most indigenous sciences do not share the extreme subject/object separation that is inherent within biomedical thought of Eurocentric origin (Hassel, 2014). Rather than attempt to detach oneself as an observer isolated from the natural world in order to gain more "objective" knowledge, many indigenous peoples maintain an intimate participatory relationship with an interwoven and inter-related natural world, of which food and health relationships are a prime example (Hassel, 2014). As we confront the idea of indigenous sciences we are confronting a realm of hidden subjectivity culturally different than that of our biomedical science (Hassel, 2014).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, there is a great need for further research on indigenous food and nutritional value. This has implications for advice given to patients that come from indigenous or immigrant backgrounds, and for addressing unequal distribution and access to food. Meaningful research and community action for Indigenous Peoples' food systems and well-being must be based on an understanding of both the broader historical, political, social, economic, cultural, and environmental conditions and the local context (Lemke and Delormier, 2017). Respect, responsibility, and relationships are core values that should apply to all research and

collaborations between Indigenous and Western researchers (Lemke and Delormier, 2017). Indigenous methodologies should receive equal weight in research. This requires critical reflection on conventional scientific knowledge production. Indigenous Peoples' rights, right to food, and food sovereignty are progressive global frames that enable mobilization for more sustainable and just food systems (Lemke and Delormier, 2017).

Eurocentric cultural values are often implicit in nutritional science. Such cultural values include human control over nature, human ascendancy over other life forms, separation of the neutral observer from the object of inquiry, separation of "objective" knowledge from "subjective" experience, among many others (Hassel, 2014). Within the context of a specialized discipline like nutrition, such ideas are easily presumed as "givens" because these shared understandings greatly facilitate scientific advancement (Hassel, 2014).

Further, nutritional primitivism itself needs to be re-evaluated and critiqued as a marketing technique (Knight, 2008). While popular critique of modern Western ways of eating is an integral part of response to the obesity and diabetes epidemics, nutritional primitivism in low-carbohydrate diet discourse reinforces a romanticised view of the past, racist and utilitarian attitudes towards non-Western people, and the elision of socioeconomic and environmental factors which promote inequalities in ill-health and disease (Knight, 2008).

Employing a cultural lens and decolonizing the research, education and counselling process will offer nutrition science an accessible means to illuminate and contemplate hidden subjectivities that are otherwise implicit within our disciplinary habits of mind (Hassel, 2014). A cultural lens would serve to extend our domain of thought by offering a different mental filter than that of the current disciplinary perspective. A cultural lens could be selected and used as needed to make more visible and apparent the dimensions of scientific practice that are otherwise implicit or opaque (Hassel, 2014).

Encouraging cross-cultural engagement (CCE) as a disciplinary practice will allow interested nutrition science professionals to learn to step into the intercultural terrain of different epistemologies and knowledge systems (Hassel, 2014). Scientists can learn to more appropriately interface with diverse knowledge systems in ways that can open a greatly expanded intercultural field of possibility (Hassel, 2014).

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