Three ways in which cultural, religious, and social values affect dietary eating patterns.

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Abstract

Diverse cultural, religious, and social values may have significant impacts on dietary eating patterns of eating, drinking, and social interaction. For example, cultures can influence the impact on diet choices and food preparation, religions can prescribe or proscribe specific dietary behaviors; some of these are rooted in historical or geographical origins as well as group folklore; and they have integral roles as expressions of religious piety and group cohesiveness, while social context including both the people who have an impact on an individual’s eating behaviour and the setting in which an individual consumes their dietary choice can influence individuals’ food choices directly and indirectly:

This paper examines the differences in dietary habits and other behaviors of distinct cultural, religious groups and socio-economic classes.

Keywords

Diet, culture, religion, social groups, health behaviors

1. **Introduction**

Diet choice is a complex area because there are a number of factors that affect the population’s and an individual’s choice of food. These have been divided into 7 key determinants:

1. Biological determinants such as hunger, appetite and taste
2. Economic determinants such as cost and income
3. Physical determinants such as access, education, skills and time
4. Social determinants such as class, culture and social context
5. Psychosocial determinants such as mood, stress and guilt
6. Attitudes, beliefs and knowledge about food and
7. Religious determinants such as denominational restrictions and prescriptions
8. **Effects of culture, religion, and social values on dietary eating patterns**

Cultures, religions and social values are significant components in influencing human choices of food category, mode of preparation and seasonal timing. However, each category provides distinct influence to the dietary patterns of populations, groups and individual’s dietary choice. This paper explores the ways in which cultural, religious and social values impact on dietary eating patterns of populations and individuals.

Here are three ways in which cultural, religious and social values can impact dietary eating patterns on populations and or individuals:

1). Cultural values

Culture is a particular society that has its own beliefs, ways of life and art. Cultural influence can impact on diet choices and food preparation – evidence has shown that traditions, beliefs and values are among the main factors influencing preference, mode of food preparation and nutritional status, **Shepherd R. (1999).** Cultural habits however, have been shown to change, for example, when individuals move to a new country and adopt the food habits of the local culture. For example, South Asian females migrating to Scotland showed increased fat intake and this associated with an increased body mass index, and incidence of heart disease and type 2 diabetes, **Shepherd R. (1999).**

Culture has the following impact on population and individual choice of dietary patterns:

1. Culture defines what is edible:
   * Culture defines what is edible and what is inedible
   * To be labelled a food, an item must be readily available, safe, and nutritious enough to support reproduction
   * Culture overrides flavour in determining what is offensive or unacceptable
   * Disliking the idea of the food rather than the actual food itself
2. Culture defines the role of certain foods in the diet:
   * Every culture has a ranking for its foods
   * Major food categories include core foods, secondary foods, and occasional foods
   * Core foods
     + Provide a significant source of calories and are regularly included in the diet, usually on a daily basis
     + Core foods are typically complex carbohydrates
   * Secondary foods
     + Foods widely consumed but not on a daily basis
     + Vary with availability
   * Peripheral foods
     + Eaten sporadically
     + Typically based on an individual’s preferences, not cultural norms
3. Culture defines how food is prepared:
   * Traditional methods of preparation vary between and within cultural groups
   * Traditional seasonings also vary among cultures

2). Religious values

**Religion**is a system of beliefs, values, and practices concerning what a person holds sacred or considers to be spiritually significant, **Émile Durkheim (1915).** Religion may directly shape diet and physical activity through specific theological teachings and indirectly through general teachings about the body and its relationship to God. Religion may also influence diet and physical activity by providing social support, social networks and social control

Religion offers venues for people of like values, interests and activities to interact, enabling adherents to form larger social networks and receive greater social support. Religion has also been proposed to promote health-related socialisation with the church serving as a context for promoting, developing and maintaining health behaviours such as diet and exercise.

Religion and diet have been examined in studies of denomination and general religiosity. Some religious groups have dietary laws and guidelines. Hassidic Jewish sects have different nutrient intakes from general populations, Catholics have different diets from Protestants and Muslims have different dietary rules from the general populations. These different measures of diet bring greater clarity to the under-examining the relationships of religion and diet. Few studies have examined general religiosity’s relationship with dietary intake. Among religious samples, religiosity is associated with ‘healthful nutrition’ among the Greek Orthodox and healthier nutritional practices (without controls). In other samples, religion is related to healthier eating practices, food choice and nutrient intake. In contrast, nutritional practices like fruit and vegetable intake and limiting sweet and junk foods are not related to seeing the body as a manifestation of God or with seeing the body as sacred among university students **(Mahoney A and Carels RA)**

Religion tends to have a greater impact on food habits than nationality or culture and religious food practices vary significantly for example, among Christianity, Judaism and Islam

1. **Christianity**

There are 3 primary branches of Christianity which include: Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodox Christianity, and Protestantism. Their dietary practices vary from none to explicit e.g

* Roman Catholics
* Do not eat meat on Ash Wednesday or Fridays in Lent
* Avoid food and beverages 1 hour before communion
* Several fast days during the year
* Eastern Orthodox Christians
* Observe numerous feast and fast days throughout the year
* Only denominations in the Protestant faith with dietary laws

* Mormons (Latter Day Saints)
* Do not use coffee, tea, alcohol, or tobacco
* Limit meats; eat mostly grains
* Some fast 1 day per month
* Most Seventh-Day Adventists
* Lacto-ovo vegetarians
* Overeating is avoided
* Coffee, tea, and alcohol are prohibited
* 5 to 6 hours between meals without snacking

**2). Judaism**

There are 3 main Jewish denominations: Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform, they differ in their interpretation of the precepts of Judaism

* Orthodox Jews believe that the laws are the direct commandments of God so they adhere strictly to dietary laws
* Reform Jews follow the moral law but may selectively follow other laws
* Conservative Jews fall between the other two groups in their beliefs and adherence to the laws
* **Judaism:** Orthodox Jews keep “kosher,” a word commonly used to identify Jewish dietary laws that define:
* “Clean” foods
* “Unclean” foods
* How food animals must be slaughtered
* How foods must be prepared
* When foods may be consumed (e.g., the timing between eating milk products and meat products)

**3). Islam**

* Muslims eat as a matter of faith and for good health
* Health and food are considered acts of worship for which Allah must be thanked
* Halal: Islamic dietary laws
* Haram: foods that are prohibited

3). Social values

Sociology is the systematic study of human society, culture, and relationships on a group level. Social context includes both the people who have an impact on an individual’s eating behaviour and the setting in which an individual consumes their dietary choice. People influence an individual’s food choices directly and indirectly: buying  
food on behalf of an individual is a direct impact whilst learning from a peer’s behaviour (conscious or subconscious) has an indirect impact. Social support (e.g. families) can have a beneficial effect on individual’s food choice by encouraging  
and supporting healthy eating practices. The setting for food consumption (e.g. home, school, work, and restaurants) will affect food choice by the availability of food options.

There are differences in food choices in different social classes which lead to both under- and over-nutrition. For example, people within the higher social class groups tend to have healthier diets (e.g. higher intakes of fruit, lean meat, oily  
fish, whole meal products, and raw vegetables) compared with manual workers, **Gibney M.J.,Margetts B.M.** It is thought that higher socioeconomic groups have healthier diets because they may have higher educational levels and may be more health conscious and have healthier  
lifestyles. Social class differences in diet are of particular concern with respect to health inequalities. However, there are high percentages of individuals who perceive their diets to be healthy and do not believe that they need to make dietary changes. People therefore believe that they are at less risk from a hazard compared to others e.g. people  
overestimate their consumption of fruit and vegetables. An individual who considers their diet to already be healthy is less likely to adopt additional healthy eating practices.

4). Conclusion

Cultural influence can impact on diet choices and food preparation – evidence has shown that traditions, beliefs and values are among the main factors influencing preference, mode of food preparation and nutritional status. Cultural habits however, have been shown to change, for example, when individuals move to a new country and adopt the food habits of the local culture.

Religion may directly shape diet and physical activity through specific theological teachings and indirectly through general teachings about the body and its relationship to God. Religion may also influence diet and physical activity by providing social support, social networks and social control. However, some religious groups have dietary laws and guidelines e.g. Hassidic Jewish sects have different nutrient intakes from general populations, Catholics have different diets from Protestants and Muslims have different dietary rules from the general populations.

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