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Teaching the Psychology of Food and Culture

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Abstract

Increasingly, psychologists practicing as clinicians, researchers, and educators are concerned about nutrition, obesity, dieting, and body image. This article describes the development and teaching of an interdisciplinary undergraduate class on the Psychology of Food and Culture. I describe the course philosophy and curriculum, as well as make recommendations to educators interested in developing a similar course. I also include recommendations for those who want to integrate components of this course into other psychology classes.

Teaching the Psychology of Food and Culture

In the Autumn of 2003 I developed and taught a course entitled “Psychology of Food and Culture” at the University of Washington-Tacoma. The impetus for this course was threefold: First, I have been active in the Association for the Study of Food and Society, an interdisciplinary association comprised of scholars in the humanities, social sciences, and health sciences and had been interested in expanding this scholarly interest into a pedagogical one. Second, I am increasingly aware of how the study of food and eating spans many areas of psychology: developmental, clinical, experimental, social, and health psychology, to name a few. Third, I believe that psychology has much to contribute to the dialogue on broad social problems related to food, including chronic dieting, poor body image, cosmetic surgery related to weight, and the growing obesity epidemic. Teaching and understanding the mechanisms of hunger, thirst, and food preferences, as well as the ways in which food mediates our cultural experience and sense of self, are important ways of applying psychology to pressing social problems and issues.

Background

I developed this class for an interdisciplinary arts and sciences program that encourages the integration of perspectives across disciplines. This institutional context gave me the liberty to design this course in such a way as to include some of my colleagues’ work from nutritional anthropology, sociology, and political economy, which was an important part of being able to teach the course in a way that examined food and culture both critically and systemically. Although my department is a fairly unique institutional setting, educators in more traditional departments can easily structure similar courses along more disciplinary lines, as there is an abundance of material in psychology on food and eating.

The course topics included the neurobehavioral and social psychological determinants of food preference and behavior, cultural meanings of food and food rituals, disordered eating, dieting,

and obesity. Experimental psychologist A. W. Logue's (2004) textbook on the psychology of eating and drinking made for an excellent course that served to debunk many misconceptions about food and eating that are perpetuated in pop psychology and pseudoscientific literature. With over 1000 references, this volume also served as a guide to the literature on eating and drinking from experimental psychology. I supplemented this with Anna Freud's work on breastfeeding and infantile feeding disturbances (Freud, 1946), Paul Rozin's work on sociocultural influence on food selection (Haidt, Rozin, McCauley, & Imada, 1997; Rozin, 1996), Susan Bordo's work on anorexia as a cultural ill (Bordo, 1986), Drenowski and Specter's (2004) research on poverty and obesity, and *Fast Food Nation* (Schlosser, 2001). For other readings and activities I relied heavily on a compendium of syllabi collected by the Association for the Study of Food and Society (ASFS), available on their Web site (<http://www.food-culture.org/>).

The objectives of these readings were to: 1) use food and eating to illustrate the myriad ways in which psychology is able to examine complex phenomena from biological, perceptual, cultural, and developmental perspectives (Cargill, 2005); 2) to contextualize psychological theories and methodologies among other disciplinary approaches in the social and natural sciences; 3) to critically evaluate pseudoscientific claims by countering them with empirical research; and 4) to illustrate research design principles and empirical findings with short, experiential class demonstrations.

Some of the topics and readings in this course as described, are too broad or interdisciplinary for many psychology departments; however, the majority are suitable for use in stand-alone psychology of food/eating classes or for modular use for other classes. For those who wish to integrate these topics into courses such as experimental, developmental, social, or health psychology classes, Table 1 indicates the topical organization of this course; how each of those topics corresponds to typical, or core, undergraduate psychology courses; and a selection of associated readings. By no means is this a comprehensive reading list, but it is a good starting point from

which to integrate these materials into existing classes. (See Logue, 2004, and the Association for the Study of Food and Society Syllabi Set, 2003, for more extensive resources.)

Insert Table 1 about here

Curriculum

The structure of the course was traditional in that students completed daily readings, papers, and objective exams. One major assignment for the course was a group project in which groups researched the validity of different “food myths.” Each group had to conduct literature reviews on their myth and present scholarly findings to the class that either supported or refuted the myth. Students researched and made presentations on food myths such as drinking lots of water makes you feel full (Greenberg, 1998; Rolls et al., 1998), pregnant women sometimes eat dirt or clay (Allport, 2002), sugar consumption causes hyperactivity (Hoover & Milich, 1994; Milich & Pelham, 1986; Milich, Wolraich, & Lindgren, 1986), and so on.

The major paper for the course asked students to reflect on how food is a medium in the construction of the self. Specifically, they were asked to examine the self as constructed through specific forms of social interactions, cultural frameworks, linguistic and symbolic decoding, and developmental experiences which lead to the formation of an autobiographical narrative. Food is one of a larger set of cues or indicators of selfhood and functions as a constituent of the narrative between autobiographical memory, self concept, ethnic, and gender identity (Fivush & Haden, 2003; Gergen & Gergen, 1997; Leary & Tangney, 2003; Snodgrass & Thompson, 1997). Toward that end,

many international students and first-generation American students used the paper to explore the psychology of immigration and the role that food plays in the immigrant and sojourner experience.

Another assignment that was particularly successful was an oral history presentation. For this assignment students researched the cultural history and significance of a specific dish, prepared it and brought to class, and wrote an accompanying scholarly paper. In keeping with some of the readings, they examined how the food was a medium for constructing the self, specifically in relation to gender, ethnic, and national identity. For example, one student wrote a paper on the Passover food charoset, which symbolizes the mortar used to enslave the Hebrews in Ancient Egypt. She examined the cultural significance of this dish and its role in the development of ethnic self-concept (Abrams, 1999; Fivush & Haden, 2003; McAdams, 2003; Nelson, 2003; Volkan, 1997, 1999).

Evaluation

Thirty-seven students enrolled in Psychology of Food and Culture during the Autumn 2003 academic quarter. The course evaluations were high – at the ninth decile in comparison to all University of Washington classes. Students completed course evaluation surveys the final week of class which used a series of 6-point (5=Excellent, 0=Very Poor) Likert-scale items. Data from these items, which ranged from median scores of 4.4-4.6, suggest that students had a high level of interest in the course material, considered social questions and problems important, found the content relevant to the rest of their academic studies, and believed they learned a lot.

Qualitative evidence came from specific comments about behavioral change as a result of taking the course. Such comments repeatedly appeared on evaluations and, in some cases, students made comments to me outside of class. Many students reported that they had never cooked anything before! Several male students reported that they spent an afternoon with their mother, mother-in-law, or grandmother learning to cook a certain dish. Several students reported that they called grandparents and great-grandparents in Poland, Italy, and even Vietnam to ask questions

about their heritage and their family foods. And not unexpectedly, students (and the professor) relished coming to class and tasting unusual and original dishes. The diversity of foods was remarkable: soul food, dim sum, Native American bread, Iranian food, just to name a few. This learning was the sort of experiential approach that engaged all the senses, focused on diversity, and built community in the classroom. At the request of students, we bound all of the recipes, along with excerpts from the students' scholarly papers, into a volume that students could pick up at the end of the academic quarter for a few dollars at the university copy center.

Finally, several students expressed interest in pursuing graduate study in clinical health psychology with a focus on food and nutrition. Other students proposed ideas for pursuing independent studies on food-related topics. One student pursued an independent research paper on the history of medicinal use of food and herbs. Another student arranged an internship at a community organic garden maintained by inner-city children.

Conclusion and Recommendations

For those interested in using components of the study of food in existing psychology courses, many of the readings cited in Table 1 describe or suggest activities and experiments that can be conducted in the classroom, such as taste tests which distinguish between non-tasters and super-tasters (Logue, 2004, p.56) or which demonstrate the five distinct tastes: sweet, salty, sour, bitter, and umami (Chaundhari, Landin, & Roper, 2000). One could design a classroom game which demonstrates the correlation between food scarcity and obesity by using Drewnowski's (2004) work. One might also adapt the "Who am I?" exercise (Moradi & Yoder, 2001) to examine food and gender role by having students address the question, "Who am I in relation to food?". In a developmental or abnormal psychology class, one might examine the diagnostic criteria of Pica in relation to what is known about cravings for dirt and clay among some pregnant women. Finally, there are countless interesting experiments on food and eating (Logue, 2004, is the best reference)

that can be used to liven up any classes in which students follow or adapt previous experiments to collect their own data for analysis and interpretation.

In sum, this was a successful class that examined important issues related to food and eating of which psychologists are becoming increasingly aware (Capaldi, 1996; DeAngelis, 2004a, 2004b; Dittman, 2004; Huff, 2004; Logue, 2004; Rich, 2004). It examined a complex system of psychological, sociological, political, and economic forces that determine food preferences, choices, and behaviors. The curriculum I developed is most suitable for liberal arts colleges and interdisciplinary programs, especially those with small class sizes. Psychologists in other types of institutions could adapt the focus and philosophy to better suit a different kind of department, instructor, or student population. For example, many instructors might shift the emphasis to an exclusively experimental (Logue, 2004), neurobehavioral (Capaldi, 1996), or social psychological (Conner & Armitage, 2002) perspective, to name only a few.

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Table 1

Selected Topics and Associated Readings Appropriate for Use In Other Psychology Classes

| Selected Topics | Corresponding Courses | Selected Associated Readings |
|--|--|---|
| Overview of the Psychology of Food | | (Capaldi, 1996; Logue, 2004) |
| Taste Aversion, Conditioning, and Flavor Preferences | Learning/Conditioning Sensation and Perception Experimental Psychology Animal Behavior Biopsychology | (Conner & Armitage, 2002; Mennella & Beauchamp, 1996; Michela & Contento, 1986) |
| Child/Adolescent Development and Food | Developmental Psychology Personality Theories Child Abnormal Psychology | (Domel et al., 1996; Freud, 1946; Lewis, Brun, Talmage, & Rasher, 1988; Mennella & Beauchamp, 1996; Michela & Contento, 1986) |
| Food and Gender | Social Psychology Psychology of Women | (Allport, 2002; Crastnopol, 2001) |
| Food and Ethnicity | Cultural Psychology Social Psychology | (Haverluk, 2002; hooks, 1998; Hughes, 1997) |
| Unhealthy/Disordered Eating | Abnormal Psychology Child Abnormal Psychology Health Psychology | (Bordo, 1986; Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1995; Cohen, Kristal, Neumark-Sztainer, & Neuhouse, 2002; Conner & Armitage, 2002) |
| Dieting, Overweight, and Obesity | Abnormal Psychology Health Psychology Motivation | (Bordo, 1993; Brownwell & Rodin, 1994; Drewnowski & Specter, 2004; Satia, Kristal, Curry, & Trudeau, 2001; Wing, 1997) |
| Food, Drink, and Addiction | Addictive Behaviors Health Psychology | (Baer, Marlatt, & McMahon, 1993; Tucker, Donovan, & Marlatt, 1999) |
| The Elements of Cuisine | Social Psychology Cultural Psychology | (Mintz, 1996; Petrini, 2003; Rappoport, 2003) |
| Food and Culture(s) | Social Psychology Cultural Psychology | (Haidt et al., 1997; Harris, 1985; McCann & Bovbjerg, 1998; Meade & Rosen, 1998; Nestle, 2002; Sobal & Whit, 1993) |

Note

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