Cultures of Gender and Age (COGA)
Member Interest Group of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics
Food Cults – Where Science and Skepticism Collide

Closing the Gap Between Nutrition Knowledge and Food Beliefs

Presented on August 22, 2018
by
Robyn Flipse, MS, MA, RDN
Nutrition Communication Services
Bradley Beach, NJ
Disclosures

- Member of the L.E.A.D. Network
  (Leaders Engaged in Advancing Dialogue)
  sponsored by Monsanto

- Scientific Advisor to the Calorie Control Council
I believe

- any food can be part of a balanced diet
- the amount and frequency of what we eat determines the benefit of our food choices, not individual foods
- a plant-based diet is best for people and the planet
Objectives

• Identify the social, political and economic conditions that give rise to food cults

• Examine how food cults have impacted food policy contrary to available scientific evidence

• Demonstrate how the ideology of a food cult can be used to achieve goals for optimal nutrition for the population at large
Eating behavior is irrational

...our rational scientific approach fails to fulfill the desperate needs of suffering people, and it is to these needs that quacks and cultists address themselves.
No human society deals rationally with food

Victims of quackery are often anxious about the uncertainties of life and the threats to their well-being. Promoters of food cults offer them solutions. The many food rituals and taboos around the world also address these fears.
Eating behavior is irrational, no human society deals rationally with food, and there is no place in the world where people eat everything edible that is available to them.
64% of people worldwide follow a diet that prohibits certain ingredients or foods

The Nielsen Global Health and Ingredient-Sentiment Survey, Q1 2016
Diet restrictions are observed around the globe

Percentage of population following special diets:

- 84% in Africa, Middle East and Asia-Pacific
- 37% in France, Spain and Italy
- 50% in North America

The Nielsen Global Health and Ingredient-Sentiment Survey, Q1 2016
Pleasure vs Health contributes to the rise in food cults

Cultures that place a high value on the pleasure of eating are less susceptible to food cults, but when eating is more closely tied to health and disease, people are likely to experience more food anxiety and consequently be more vulnerable to food cults.

Harvey Levenstein, Food Historian

Harvey Levenstein, Fear of Food: A History of Why We Worry about What We Eat. University of Chicago Press, 2012
Behind every act of eating is the disturbing connection to death

Eating is a magical ritual where life is transmitted from one object to another

The rituals, symbols and meanings behind food arose as a way to forget about death

The desire for more life – or to become immortal - allowed ‘Food Cultures’ to emerge

Free Press, 1975
The Omnivore’s Dilemma contributes to food cults

“Neophilia vs Neophobia”

Desire to try new foods vs Fear of eating something toxic
The world is populated by over 7 billion people who each had to learn what and how to eat to survive, and we aren’t all doing it the same way.
Food cults relieve fears and anxiety which are often a metaphor for other concerns

• Mistrust of government institutions
• Loss of integrity in the scientific community
• Corporate greed
• Industrial conspiracies
• Economic insecurity
• Shifts in political power

These concerns are now a permanent condition of modern life

Jackson P. Anxious Appetites. Bloomsbury 2015
Features of food cults

- Becomes a central organizer of one's identity
- Revolves around a group dogma or ideology
- Involves an immersion experience, usually achieved through sacrifice or deprivation
- Follows a charismatic leader or “guru”
- Includes special rules, rituals and practices
- Shares a community of worship (increasingly online)

Food cults vs fad diets and mental illness

- Food cults are social communities built around a food ideology that promises relief from fear and anxiety.

- Fad diets are started impulsively and are short-lived, often to lose weight, offering less structure and community.

- Orthorexia is a solitary effort by someone with a genetic predisposition to obsessive compulsive disorder to find the ‘perfect diet’.

Cults tell us everything we need to know

Promote a binary way of thinking about food as “good” or “bad”

Can use food labels to find the bad ingredients or Nutrition Facts

Right choices save you from the dangers of the marketplace

Do not consider the synergy of foods or other dietary patterns
Objective #1

Identify the social, political and economic conditions that give rise to food cults today
What triggers a rise in food cults?

1. Food Scares and Recalls
2. Threats to National Security
3. Refuted Research
4. Emphasis on Disease Prevention
5. Public Health Campaigns
6. Mass Media and Celebrity Hype
1. Food Scares and Recalls

Soy nut butter recalled as 6 people are hospitalized with E. coli

Without inspections, 90 tons of frozen pork dumplings are recalled

Healthy food is trying to kill us
Where can we turn when food is tainted?

Cults focused on:
- Vegetarianism
- Organically grown
- Unprocessed food
- Juicing
- Fasting
- Detoxing
- Cleanses

Are you sure this is organic? I feel much safer if my food is fertilized with manure instead of pesticides.
2. Threats to National Security

In the anxiety about terrorism following the 9/11 attacks and the 2003 U.S. Senate Hearing, "Obesity War: Are Our Dietary Guidelines Losing" the lines between civilian and soldier became blurred.

A heightened sense of one’s mortality prompts an increased level of control over the body, seen in paramilitary-style fitness regimes and restrictions on diet from eating only pre-agricultural foods to starvation.
How can we defend our nation?

Cults that focus on:

- Paramilitary fitness regimes
- Paleo/Caveman/Primal diets
- Eating disorders
- Localist Movement
- Raw foods

I can't control everything in my life, but I can control what I put in my body.
Pseudoscientists imitate the style of legitimate scientists by citing studies and using statistics and graphs to prove their point. Then they offer definitive advice about what to eat, while recommendations from health professionals are more complicated and conditional.
Seek simplicity when science fails you

Cults that focus on:

- Nutritionism
- Healthism
- “Free-From” claims
- Superfoods
- Dietary supplements
- Functional foods

International Journal of Health Services

Healthism and the Medicalization of Everyday Life

Robert Crawford
First Published July 1, 1980 | research-article

Columbia University Press, 2013
“Focus on variety, nutrient density, and amount. To meet nutrient needs within calorie limits, choose a variety of nutrient-dense foods across and within all food groups in recommended amounts.”

“Do not eat wheat”
4. Disease Prevention

Joint WHO/FAO Expert Consultation on Diet, Nutrition and the Prevention of Chronic Diseases
Geneva, Switzerland, 2002

Circulation

AHA/ACC PREVENTION GUIDELINE
2013 AHA/ACC Guideline on Lifestyle Management to Reduce Cardiovascular Risk
A Report of the American College of Cardiology/American Heart Association Task Force on Practice Guidelines

CA: A Cancer Journal for Clinicians

American Cancer Society guidelines on nutrition and physical activity for cancer prevention
Reducing the risk of cancer with healthy food choices and physical activity
Eat less food to the rescue

- Longevity Cults
- Intermittent Fasting
- Single/Mono Food Cults
- Limited Food Groups
5. Public Health Campaigns

Food safety messages increase concerns about life threatening bacterial contamination of the food supply.
Clean living to the rescue!

- Clean eating
- Clean labels
- All natural
- No Preservatives
- Antibiotic-free
- Pesticide free
- Hormone free

What Does Clean Eating Mean to Dietitians?
By Melinda Johnson, Contributor | March 27, 2015, at 6:02 a.m.

More chains commit to antibiotic-free chicken: survey
By Lisa Jennings | Sep 28, 2017
6. Mass Media and Celebrity Hype

When there is a loss of a cultural authority – a clear, unequivocal, centrally constructed, and widely accepted view of reality – the void must be filled.

“Hypocritical opportunists in industry”

“Extremists in academia”

“Arbitrary regulators at the FDA”

“Ill-informed scientists”

“Ideological liberal in Congress”

“Zealots at the FTC”

“Huckster physicians”

Where to turn when there are no experts?

- Gluten Free
- Non-GMO
- No Added Sugar
- No Artificial Sweeteners
Objective #2

Examine how food cults have impacted food policy contrary to available scientific evidence
Consumer perceptions drive changes in the food industry

“Our research focused on how consumer perceptions can inform the manufacturing, retail, and foodservice industries in an effort to understand the future of foods and beverages.”
Untested replacement ingredients are used
Low food quality is overlooked in favor of avoidance claims

Fazoli's Announces Removal Of All Artificial Sweeteners, Flavors, Preservatives And Colors From Its Entire Food Menu

- America's Largest Fast Casual Italian Franchise is the 1st National Brand Under 1,000 Units to Unveil Completely Clean Food Menu -
Nutritional value is compromised when fortification is avoided

“Euromonitor has seen some manufacturers stop fortifying foods with minerals and vitamins – which often have long, unpronounceable names – in order to shorten ingredients lists and clean up labels... reflecting a growing suspicion of overly engineered food.”

Dr. Shelley Balanko, The Hartman Group
Misinformation breeds more mistrust

SMARTNEWS Keeping you current

Some Brands Are Labeling Products “GMO-free” Even if They Don’t Have Genes

More companies are paying to label their food as non-GMO, whether they need it or not.

Food costs go up with deceptive labels
Unnecessary diet changes can have unintended consequences.
74% of packaged foods and beverages in the U.S. contain some form of sweetener.

Consumers view sugar as “natural,” but not good for them, yet will choose it over even small amounts of artificial sweeteners.

The food industry is expected to engineer a natural solution that tastes sweet and has no calories or side effects – which is an oxymoron.

Unrealistic expectations for a sweet & natural solution
Demands for local food is at odds with food production and the environment.

What’s Your Dietary Footprint?
12/06/2016 01:18 pm ET | Updated Dec 07, 2016

The New York Times
Paying Farmers to Go Organic, Even Before the Crops Come In
By STEPHANIE STROM | JULY 14, 2016

Locally Sourced Foods Top Forecast of 2016 Menu Trends
11/06/2015

Thill S. Building a Sustainable Food System, One Campus at a Time.
Objective #3

Demonstrate how the ideology of a food cult can be used to achieve goals for optimal nutrition for the population
We have more in common with one another about how we feel about eating than what we actually eat.

We don’t have to eat the same foods to reach the same goals.
FIND THE COMMON GROUND

- authentic
- acceptance
- transparent
- reliable
- real
- affordable
- value
- SUSTAINABLE
- trustworthy
- pure
- healthy
- equitable
- integrity
- compassionate
- wholesome
- ETHICAL
- honest
- natural
- healthy
- ethical
Concern about food coming from a globalized and complex food supply chain

Conversations

✓ Get to know the produce manager where you shop
✓ Visit a farmer's market to talk to growers
✓ Join a food cooperative for a share of locally grown crops
✓ Take a farm or factory tour

Questions

✓ What do they like to eat when they travel and why?
✓ How does the rest of the world view our food standards?
✓ What are their favorite brands and why?
✓ What builds your confidence in a product?
Belief that nature & natural is better; fear of ‘technology’ applied to food

Conversations
✓ Compare food choices to those of our grandparents
✓ Discuss how they would select food if it had no labels
✓ Provide examples of how food processing helps them
✓ Talk about the technology behind grooming products

Questions
✓ Are there any risks in nature?
✓ Is all technology bad?
✓ Why is food technology harder to embrace?
✓ What is your definition of natural?
Mistrust of growers, processors and retailers who are in the business for profit

Conversations
✓ Discuss how important reputation is to brands
✓ Share examples of how food scares affect the supply chain
✓ Explore motives of organic brands that make a profit
✓ Explain how organic & conventional food is inspected

Questions
✓ What types of processing makes food safer?
✓ Do you believe food is safer in other countries and why?
✓ Are some fresh foods safer than processed foods?
✓ How can consumers do more at home to keep their food safe?
Difficulty understanding scientific methods and risk/benefit analysis

Conversations
✓ Experts don’t agree on everything, just the big things
✓ Positive choices can offset negatives ones
✓ All science is subject to change over time
✓ Discuss the difference between hazards, risks & exposure

Questions
✓ How often have you won the lottery?
✓ What is a safe dose and frequency of consumption?
✓ Do you know who to turn to for expert advice?
✓ Can you recognize the signs of quackery?
### Cult focus vs. Dietary benefit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cult focus</th>
<th>Dietary benefit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Juicing</td>
<td>eating more fruits &amp; vegetables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paleo</td>
<td>doing more home cooking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raw Food</td>
<td>eating more nuts &amp; seeds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nutritionism</td>
<td>reading more food labels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gluten-Free</td>
<td>eating more ancient grains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longevity</td>
<td>monitoring caloric intake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clean labels</td>
<td>eating less processed food</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It is easier to change a man’s religion than to change his diet

~ Margaret Mead
The goal for nutrition professionals

Helping individuals achieve and enjoy a healthy lifestyle and optimal dietary pattern while respecting their beliefs

~ Robyn Flipse
Thank you!

Robyn Flipse, MS, MA, RDN
RLFlipse@aol.com
Q & A
CPE Certificate

If you are watching this presentation LIVE, you will receive your CPE certificate via email within 48 hours post webinar.

If you are watching the recording and wish to receive CPE, you will need to provide the following code word: COGA2018

Please send the request for CPE along with the code word to DPGMIGRelations@eatright.org. Remember to indicate the name of the webinar.
COGA thanks you for your participation and attendance. Watch for your CPEU certificate, link to the presentation recording, and a copy of the slides to be sent via email.

Stay connected with us!

https://coga.webauthor.com/

Facebook: @culturesofgenderandage