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Imposed Food and its Challenges to Food Security

Zachary Tobias, Eastern Michigan University

Abstract

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) declares that food security exists when all people have access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food. This is taken to understand food security in four measures: availability, access, utilization, and stability. The focus of this paper will be on access which concerns the affordability and allocation of the food supply (Ahteensuu & Siipi, 2016). I argue that social pressures on food choice, which I call food impositions, limit one's access to sufficient and safe foods by encouraging undereating in women and unhealthily high volumes of meat consumption in men. People of color are also subject to food impositions which identify certain places of food sale as "white spaces" and thereby discourage certain eating habits in communities of color. More generally, food impositions interfere with individual preferences which is an issue of sustaining food insecurity, but also interferes with identity expressions through food choice. Food impositions come in two forms both of which play the same, harmful role in our dieting practices. Positive impositions, which tell individuals what to eat and negative impositions, which tell individuals what not to eat. I will also respond to two objections. First, that this overgeneralizes the term "food insecurity." Second, that some food impositions are necessary or good.

Introduction

The most commonly employed definition of food security was created by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) at the 1996 World Food Summit. It declares "food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life" (FAO, 1996). This definition has been taken to understand food security in four measures: availability, access, utilization, and stability. This essay will focus on access to food, which refers to the affordability and allocation of the food supply (Ahteensuu and Siipi, 2016, 411) and will also expand our understanding of access to account for freedom from social pressures. Using the above definition, I will argue that social pressures on food choice, which I will call food impositions, limit one's access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious foods and thus, creates food insecurity. Additionally, food impositions prevent one from expressing their preferences with respect to food; simultaneously preventing them from expressing part(s) of their identity. To do so I will draw on arguments presented in the gender and food discourse. Women and girls are encouraged to undereat, which results in negative health consequences and, in many cases, eating disorders. Meanwhile, men and boys are encouraged to overeat, particularly red meat, again, resulting in negative health consequences.

Moving away from gender and food, I will discuss Julie Guthman's work which classifies farmers' markets and community-supported agriculture operations (CSAs) as "white spaces," this understanding helps identify limitations on the ability of people of color (POC) to access particular foods.

I will also respond to two possible objections. One that argues my claims over generalize food insecurity, which may be harmful to individuals facing food insecurity in the current conception. The other objection I respond to clarifies which food impositions are problematic.

Expanding conceptions of food insecurity is important because it helps policy makers address vulnerable populations that have long been neglected with respect to food. The expansion that I propose is particularly helpful because it shifts the focus away from food itself and towards the way that we interact with food.

Where do Food Impositions Come From?

While some instances of food impositions may come from individuals directly onto others, food impositions are truly problematic because they are reinforced by society at large. Popular media; product marketing; the gender binary; and institutional racism, sexism, and other forms of identity-based oppression create and sustain beliefs about who we are and what we must eat. Many of the food impositions discussed in the following sections may reach the status of cultural hegemony; at least this is the case for meat and masculinity, Randall (2016) argues. “[T]he intrinsic act of eating meat itself... has become synonymous with [strength, virility, and masculinity]” (Randall, 2016, 74) and these qualities are connected with what it means to be a “real man” (73). When food impositions become so normalized, they are hard for individuals to resist.

Nancy Williams (2015) turns to a Foucauldian analysis of gender-food relationships to show how “[m]eat eating... is a disciplinary practice pushed by agribusiness (and others) that produces subjected bodies and identities” (141) and further speaks on cultural pressures on women’s bodies (144-146), many of which are tied up in food impositions. The central thesis of Williams’ paper, in line with her Foucauldian analysis, is how individuals “police” themselves to conform to social expectations about how we present our bodies. The fear of social judgment, punishment, or ostracization, creates a system in which food impositions are created by society at large, but sustained, in part, by individuals for themselves. Such fears make us dependent on supposed authorities who tell us how to eat, act, and present ourselves (Williams 2015, 143-144). Take, for an example of ways individuals impose certain food(s) onto themselves, Randall’s (2016) claim that “[m]eat consumption becomes a definitive way for men to still feel ‘masculine’” (78).

Men and Meat

I would like to clarify how food impositions create food insecurity. It is important to note that the imposition itself does not create insecurity, but depending on what food is imposed, food security may follow. Take men and meat for example. Average dietary patterns of men (ones that contain more meat and less fruit and vegetables than female counterparts) leads to an increased risk of developing heart disease (Courtenay, 2000). Additionally, there is a possible link between eating meat and an increased risk for particular kinds of cancer (Joyce et al., 2012). Thus, men and boys are encouraged to eat unhealthily and since the FAO definition of food security requires “food to meet... dietary needs and food preferences for an active and *healthy*

life” (emphasis added; FAO, 1996), men are food insecure in that their access to healthy foods is affected by social pressures. This relies on the latter aspect of the access component of our understanding of food security: allocation. When it comes to meat, men are allocated too much. This is what I will call a positive imposition: foods that members of a particular social group are expected or permitted to eat. This is distinct from a negative imposition: foods that we are expected not to eat or prohibited from eating.

Negative impositions also affect men and boys. Many foods are socially identified as feminine (salad, yogurt, fresh fruits and vegetables) and thus, men have trouble accessing them. “Even when food exists near to a household, its members may lack safe, tolerable, and dignified means to reach it” (Ahteensuu and Siipi, 2016, 411). This quote helps us understand the social barriers to food security that are often overlooked. Men, in these cases, have difficulty accessing particular (healthy) foods while they make up too large a share of meat consumption. As I noted above, a broad understanding of access as food allocation might be able to explain the relationship between food impositions and food security in some cases. But as we will see later in the race-based food impositions section of this paper, relying on allocation in this way becomes tricky as it is not always clear who is doing the allocating. To establish a clear connection between food impositions and food insecurity, we need to broaden our understanding of limited access to account for social pressures and expectations about what we eat.

Women and Undereating

I want to shift the conversation to female gendered food impositions to better understand negative impositions. Women and girls are conditioned to eat less than male counterparts (Watson, 2015, 125-126). In this sense women are prevented from sufficient access to *all* foods.

In part, these impositions are due to ideals of feminine self-sacrifice. Women and girls are taught to attend to others’ needs before their own, resulting in some cultures having women eat only after men and boys have, and others serving women smaller portions of food (Watson, 2015, 125-126). In this instance, a household may be food secure but the food coming into it may not be allocated equitably. The women of this supposed household would be food insecure as they lack proper access to food, while other members of the household may not be food insecure.

Otherwise, female gendered food impositions have their roots in conventional feminine beauty standards which demand thinness out of women and girls. The risk for developing particular eating disorders in women and girls is significantly higher than in men and boys and women reported feeling worse about overeating than their male counterparts (Hoerr et al., 2002; Lewinsohn et al., 2002. 433-434). Gendered food impositions are likely a culprit here.

The case of eating disorders highlights how our current understanding of food security may be inadequate; an individual may be food secure on paper, but not in practice. They might have stable economic access to available nutritious foodstuffs, as well as the body and knowhow to utilize it, that is, they are food secure, but may not actually be accessing foods because of

social barriers. That is, capacity to access food is not limited by affordability or allocation (or at least not clearly limited), but the accessibility of food may be confined to undignified and intolerable means in which the purchase and consumption of food is not greeted with social acceptance. By shifting our conceptions of food insecurity, we can begin to understand individuals who have eating disorders, or are otherwise restricted in their food choice, as food insecure.

White Spaces and Food Sale

Naturally, food impositions are placed on individuals for more than their perceived gender. Race-based food impositions are also prevalent, particularly for people of color. The following section will look at Julie Guthman's work (2008) which argues that alternative food institutions, specifically farmers' markets and community-supported agriculture (CSA), are white spaces; that they systematically exclude POC from participation. She too is tackling food choice from a social access perspective. She notes that POC, and black people in particular, do not make up a proportional share of farmers' market customers (Guthman, 2008, 388). Attributing this to two practices: color blindness and universalism.

"Color blindness" describes the phenomena by which one refuses to recognize race as a difference maker or refuses to admit that they recognize race as such. While this may seem like a nonracist view, the problem is that when individuals attempt to do this, they also fail to recognize race-based oppression and privilege (Guthman, 2008, 390-391). Meaning that institutions cannot properly address issues present in their operations. They cannot know, for example, that black people are not coming in proportionally equal numbers to farmers' markets because they supposedly are not paying attention to the races of their customers and thus, the existing problem is made invisible.

Although, color blindness on its own is not really a food imposition. This is why Guthman's second attribution is relevant. Universalism, as Guthman is using the term, is "the assumption that values held primarily by whites are normal and widely shared" (2008, 391). When individuals do not share these values, the universalist responds in one of two ways: attempts to educate those individuals or forever marks them as different (Guthman, 2008, 391). The former is a positive food imposition in which certain values with respect to food are forced upon minority groups while the latter takes on a more subtle form of a negative food imposition.

By marking POC as "other" and participating in practices of color blindness, alternative food institutions tacitly exclude POC from participation. When alternative food institutions become white spaces, they send the message to POC that they aren't welcome. Furthermore, much of the blame of lower participation is scapegoated onto POC themselves. Managers and producers at farmers' markets and CSAs attribute the lack of participation to faults of POC saying things like "Hispanics aren't into fresh, local, and organic products" (Guthman, 2008, 393).

This becomes an issue of food security because it limits access to food that is (typically) healthy, ethically sourced, fresh, and local all of which may be important values for food preference and health concerns. Again, our current understanding of food security cannot

properly address the injustice that is happening here. The above exclusion is not directly an economic one so access as affordability does not classify it as food insecurity. It cannot, say, explain why a wealthy black person is not accessing this food. And access as allocation needs more to be said because of the prominent understanding that food is not being allocated to POC because of their own food values. We need to include in our definition of food security an understanding of access as being free from social pressures so as to properly sort out issues of the ways in which food is prescribed to individuals based on their perceived identities.

Food Preference Interference

There is yet another way in which food impositions make individuals food insecure. Another condition of food security is that food meets “dietary needs and food *preferences*” (emphasis added; FAO, 1996). Food impositions deny one’s ability to exercise their autonomy with respect to food. Impositions are often tacitly taught to individuals during their youth and then reinforced throughout life. But food can be an important way to honor and experience culture, express values about animal life and the environment, and otherwise make up parts of our identity. If, for examples, one has meat positively imposed on them or is negatively imposed to stay away from alternative food institutions, then they are limited in their ability to express certain values if they have them or are limited in their ability to learn and hold new values by systemically being excluded from various rhetorics. Thus, to limit one’s food choice is to deny them their identity. “[W]e become selves through interacting with food” (Moore & Biondo 2016, 17). Food impositions then are not only a problem of food security but also present issues for expressions of identity and autonomy.

Objections

One could argue that addressing food impositions as a matter of food security lowers the bar too far for who can be considered food insecure. The fear might be that the goals of food security would be diluted; after all, because of the connection I have made with gender, food impositions would make near everybody food insecure and this might be problematic for creating policy or it may create a false equivalence between somebody who is merely facing food impositions and somebody who is facing poverty, lives in a so-called food desert, or has other barriers that make them food insecure. However, because these impositions perpetuate unhealthy eating habits, I argue that it is indeed important to address them. While food impositions may not be as severe as other aspects of food insecurity—although I would contest the severity question as well, especially with food impositions that result in practices such as eating disorders—the massive scope of the people they affect is cause for concern. By recognizing that food insecurity is something that directly affects us all, we bring more attention to the whole broader issue. We all live in social systems that expect certain, often unhealthy, eating habits; the negative health outcomes of those habits are nothing to disregard. It might be that, in part, the health consequences of our eating habits have become as normalized as the food impositions that cause them. This needs to be addressed and a way to do that is recognize that food insecurity is the cause, and then work to combat it, not just food impositions, but all of food insecurity.

The second objection that I want to respond to is that seemingly not all food impositions are bad and the way to combat current food impositions is through alternative food impositions. Addressing the first part of this objection is a matter of clarification which will show why the latter part is acceptable. Some food impositions are indeed *good*. There are many negative impositions that tell us to refrain from eating food that will directly harm us such as undercooked meat or foods that are poisonous or contain harmful bacteria. And there are positive impositions that tell us to eat food rich in vitamins and minerals that are necessary for our bodily functions. These fall under the definition of what I have called impositions but are not the focus of this paper.

Food impositions are wrong only when they cause food insecurity. Food insecurity is caused when people cannot meet the needs “for an active and healthy life” (FAO, 1996) and while it is beyond the scope of this paper to piece out a conception of health, not all food impositions prevent our access to food that meets this condition. Thus, if a food imposition promotes, or at the very least is not mutually exclusive with, a healthy lifestyle, then it is permissible. Throughout this paper, I have been tacitly endorsing certain food impositions such as “men should eat less meat,” as the negation of the current dominant food imposition “men eat meat.” I do not find this to be a contradiction in my argument because such an imposition does not create or sustain food insecurity.

Another way that we might hold the food impositions discussed above as distinct from ones like “eat food rich in nutrients” is that the former target individuals based on a perceived part of their identity. This unjust singling out, exclusion, or coercion that is present in only select food impositions is another reason to be hesitant to lump all food impositions together and label them as good or bad. In this way, my endorsement of “men should eat less meat” is better understood as “everybody should eat little or no meat” and this is true for other counter-impositions that can be pulled from my argument.

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