



## Varying Food Practices Among Three Low-Income Groups in the Northeastern United States: Rural, Homeless & Refugee

Paper first received 3 February 2019; Accepted: 17 May 2019; Published in final form 4 September 2019

AMY L. REDMAN<sup>a\*</sup>

### Abstract.

**The purpose of this research is to gain an in-depth understanding of low-income food practices among groups at or below the poverty line, to include: a rural group, a homeless group, and a refugee group. To explore how food practices differ among the low-income groups, an ethnographic design was used, including 60 hours of observations in group venues and individual/family homes, and 22 semi-structured interviews, conducted in the Northeastern United States. The findings from this study suggest that each low-income group has distinct food practices and consumption patterns. The following paper describes three main characteristics found within each group: 1) time spent preparing and eating food, 2) food item types, and 3) cooking skills. This research adds to the growing body of literature showing heterogeneity in food practices among low-income groups, and calls for increased scholarly and political recognition of the differences that exist within groups sharing similar economic situations.**

**KEYWORDS: Low-Income Food Practices; Culture & Food Security; Socioeconomic Status & Food; Pierre Bourdieu & Food; Qualitative Methods & Food; Lower SES & Cooking Skills**

### INTRODUCTION

Lower-income groups are more susceptible to diet-related diseases including obesity, diabetes, and heart disease (CDC 2016; Ogden et al. 2010). They are also more likely to need food and nutritional assistance<sup>1</sup> (Coleman-Jensen, Rabbitt, Gregory and Singh, 2017), yet the eating behaviors of lower-income groups are still imperfectly understood. Too often, in public discourse, lower-socioeconomic (SES) groups are stereotyped as “uneducated poor people making unhealthy choices,” however this reductionist perspective continues to be disproven in the literature (e.g. Alkon et al., 2013; Baumann, Szabo and Johnston, 2017, p. 4; Beagan, Chapman and Power, 2018; Smith, 2016). In fact, the dichotomous tendency to view the diets of higher-SES groups as moral, just, and healthy and those of lower-SES groups as unhealthy and

Amy L. Redman<sup>a\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Sociology and Anthropology Department, Middlebury College, Middlebury, Vermont, USA*

\*Email: [aredman@smcvt.edu](mailto:aredman@smcvt.edu) | Phone: 315-854-0694 | Mailing Address: 619 Taft Road, Huntington, VT 05462

*Amy L. Redman is a visiting assistant sociology professor at Middlebury College in Middlebury, Vermont. Her teaching and research interests include: Food and Culture, Sustainability and the Environment, Sociology of Health and Illness, and Qualitative Research Methods.*

of ‘bad taste’ will hopefully continue to erode under the growing body of studies showing that low-income food practices are anything but homogenous and easy to predict (Maguire, 2016).

This study illustrates a unique perspective on low-income food practices by exploring how three discrete groups, or class-fractions, within the same low-income category differ in food behavior. Specifically, this article examines the everyday food practices among three low-income groups: a rural group, a homeless group, and a refugee group. To highlight the heterogeneity in food practices, characteristics like time spent preparing and eating foods, food item types, and cooking skills are presented for each group. Such findings echo the call for a more robust and diversified set of public health policies to mitigate undesirable trends related to food insecurity and diet-related diseases.

## **BACKGROUND**

### *Socioeconomics, Food Choices & Health*

When examining food choices, scholars have routinely found social class differences in diets, eating practices, and health outcomes (Darmon and Drewnowski, 2008; Crotty and Germov, 2004; Prattala, Berg and Puska, 1992). For example, one American epidemiological study revealed that higher-SES groups are more likely to consume whole grains, lean meats, fish, low-fat dairy products, and fresh fruits and vegetables, while refined grains and added fats were associated with lower SES groups (Darmon and Drewnowski, 2008, p. 1108). Moreover, while the diets and food practices of differing SES groups and their related health outcomes persist, the reasons why are still unclear. For example, one point of contention in the literature is how much food costs are associated with healthy eating (Daniels, 2016).

Some argue that the role of economic indicators such as accessibility and affordability significantly influence the food choices made by low-income groups (e.g. Alkon et al., 2013; Sheldon et al., 2010). Similarly, in examining food landscapes in rural New Hampshire, Esala (2011) found that availability, cost, and quality of healthy foods seriously impacted the lower-income families living there. Furthermore, researchers proclaim that discerning and budgeting low-income individuals and families can eat within dietary guidelines for fruits and vegetables at a low-cost (Stewart et al., 2011). An increased prevalence of diet-related diseases and food insecurity among low-income groups, coupled with an unclear picture of why these differences persist makes room for further research on low-income food practices.

### *Low-Income Food Practices*

The relationship between class, tastes, and overall food practices is a complicated one. A multitude of social factors are at play in how people relate to food; for example, previous research shows variables like gender, ethnicity, social class, and regional/geographic location influence food behaviors (Alkon et al., 2013; Beagan et al., 2016; Esala, 2011; Inness, 2000, p. 4). However, patterns associated with how low-income groups relate to food through practices such as cooking, or procurement of (or desire for) healthy foods, remain opaque.

The loss of cooking skills, for example, is not exclusive to one socioeconomic class but one that is currently debated in the literature. In the context of the modern industrial food system, and the increased availability of prepared and pre-packaged foods, the cooking practices of all SES groups are in question (Enger-Stringer, 2010; Lyon, Colquhoun and Alexander, 2003). Furthermore, how people cook (or don't cook) is not necessarily a direct reflection of their cooking skills (Enger-Stringer, 2010, p. 114). A person may know how to cook, but simply not have the desire, resources, or space to do so. Alas, researchers have debunked the notion that

cooking illiteracy is synonymous with low-SES, thus that low-income groups are unable, or uninterested in cooking their own food (e.g. Alkon et al., 2016; Stead, Caraher and Anderson, 2004). One study examining food skills among low-income communities in Scotland finds varying levels of skills and confidence when cooking (Stead, Caraher and Anderson, 2004). In short, the presumed decrease in cooking skills in many developed countries, particularly among low-SES groups, is one that needs more attention. Similarly, how low-income groups think about and acquire healthy foods is more complicated than public perception.

Despite public and political discourse around ‘the poor tastes of the poor’ of low-income groups, evidence suggests no statistically significant differences in the desire for healthful grocery stores between food-secure and food-insecure households (Maguire, 2016, p. 13). For example, one American study found that, despite low-income families desiring healthy foods, it was not economically advantageous to buy them due to children’s taste preference (Daniel, 2016). In the study, the adult caregivers’ desires to provide healthy diets to their families were hindered by the economic investment associated with children trying – and subsequently not eating – new, healthier foods (Daniel, 2016).

To understand the multiplicity of food practices among low-income groups, scholars reference the diverse cultural repertoires or ‘toolkits’ (Swidler, 1986) that people employ to explain why members of the same group (for example, low-income groups) can act differently (Baumann, Szabo and Johnston, 2017, p. 2). In other words, the habits, routines, and ways of being around and thinking about food can vary within the same economic groups: not necessarily because these groups have differing values or preference in their desire for healthy foods, but rather because food practices are molded by the ‘skills, habits, and styles’ of the environments they are in (Swidler, 1986, p. 275). For example, one’s social class origin, the SES they grew up in, can significantly influence their taste preferences and food practices regardless of their current SES (Beagan, Power and Chapman, 2015). Defying stereotypes, a middle-class consumer may value getting cheap food over more expensive healthy food (Baumann, Szabo and Johnston, 2017); similarly, a low-income consumer may desire and strive for ‘healthy, ethical eating’ (Beagan, Power and Chapman, 2015, p. 79). In addition to the varying cultural repertoires used by low-income groups to produce varying food practices, Bourdieu’s (1979) concepts of class-fractions and cultural habitus provide further theoretical rationale for examining food practices among different low-SES groups.

### *Class Fractions & Cultural Food Habitus*

The seminal work of Pierre Bourdieu in *Distinction* (1979) offers multiple theoretical concepts for investigating social class and food practices, two of which are *class fractions* and *cultural habitus*. First, while we may think of the ‘wealthy’ as high-class and the ‘poor’ as low-class, the use of economic, social, and cultural capital varies greatly in every society, and every society consists of many various sub-groups, which he terms ‘class fractions’ (Bourdieu, 1979/1984). Using Bourdieu’s theoretical underpinnings, the following work extends the concept of class fractions to explore the food practices of geo-socially specific groups - rural, homeless, and refugee groups- representing three low-income class fractions. Theoretically, class fractions provide a framework for looking at everyday food practices within three lower-income groups, but the concept also helps to continue to fill a gap in the literature that seeks to tease apart very important differences in food practices within social class groups.

Additionally, Bourdieu's (1979) term cultural habitus offers further rationale for exploring how members of the same SES vary in food practices. For example, in *Distinction*, Bourdieu explains that habitus is an ingrained, often taken-for-granted, set of habits, skills, and overall dispositions. The everyday tastes in food, for example, do not necessarily descend from cognitively remembered, learned habits, but rather from the 'smells, looks, and sounds that surrounded and infused the habits of our homes and families while we were growing up' (Bourdieu 1979/84, p. 77; Dillon, 2010, p. 415). While Bourdieu wrote about cultural habitus to link relatively enduring schemas of social class reproduction and inequality (Dillon, 2010, p. 415), the concept of habitus can be extended to explore and describe the food practices among different low-income groups and how they vary. In other words, this research seeks to explore the cultural food habitus characteristics of the three low-income class fractions in this study and how they vary.

## METHODS

Data gathering was done by using an ethnographic design, including 60 hours of participant observation and 22 interviews at sites rich in food behaviors, practices, and everyday talk in general. This work began with a grant-funded pilot project to gather data for a regional food summit about the experiences of those at risk of being food insecure. Based on the pilot project, it was concluded that low-income cooking classes, homeless shelter kitchens, and community gardens function as accessible social settings to observe the processes involved in how individuals and families behave around food. These settings are naturally 'food-centered,' with a host of opportunities to observe and talk about food. Therefore, to make observations in public food domains, I observed low-income rural cooking classes, an urban homeless shelter kitchen, and a refugee community garden, all located in the Northeastern United States. As noted, I drew a small sample of subjects for home observations and interviews from these public food domains.

### *Settings & Observations*

To gain access to the low-income cooking class, I observed a Cooking Matters™ class organized by the local food bank. Cooking Matters™ is a nationally funded program by Share Our Strength, an anti-hunger group. Classes are offered at a variety of sites throughout the United States and based on their locations (e.g. rural, urban) draw participants who represent various populations within lower SES groups. To observe the cooking class, I became a volunteer for the six-week duration of the class, with responsibilities ranging from food shopping and preparation to class set-up and cooking. The rural cooking class consisted of four mothers and five children.

Like the rural cooking class, I came to know the food practices of the homeless group by volunteering in a shelter kitchen. The newly constructed building was the largest in the area, serving men, women, and families with approximately 100 beds. It was also equipped with an industrial kitchen; this is where I spent my time prepping, cleaning, and serving food with other volunteers and shelter residents. On typical nights at the shelter, I observed 25-30 people with an 80:20, male to female ratio. The sample was also predominantly white, with only one African American family. The data presented below pertains to food practices seen at the shelter only. I did not gather data on food practices associated with other forms of homelessness, for example, living on the streets, in a car, or 'couch surfing.'

Lastly, to learn about food practices among the refugee group, observations were made at a community garden. The community garden sits next to a small urban college and is approximately one acre in size, with nearly 140 plots. The gardens are primarily maintained by refugee families. The gardeners include refugees from a variety of different countries, including Bhutan, Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, and Iraq.

### *Interviews*

Interviews consisted of gathering general background demographic information (e.g. age, household size, education, employment, income), along with asking questions related to food preparation, eating, and food security (e.g. Where do you food shop? Have you ever experienced food shortage or hunger? If so, what strategies did you use for obtaining food?).

For all groups, interviews lasted between 30-90 minutes. As noted, the study consisted of 22 low-income individuals: six rural, seven homeless, and nine refugee individuals. Among the individuals interviewed, there were twelve women and ten men, between 21 to 62 years of age. All interviewees, except for one homeless man (due to his immigration status), had been on, or were currently in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as the 'Food Stamp Program.' This meaning that they are at, or below, the poverty line, which for a family of four is an annual income of approximately 25,100 dollars a year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). [Note, all study participants' names have been changed to protect their identity. To see a full list of interviewee characteristics, see Table 1.]

### *Data Analysis & Reflexivity*

In exploring the everyday food practices of the lower-income individuals in this study, I systematically wrote down my observations in the field and then transcribed my notes into typed fieldnotes. This included detailed accounts and descriptions of the settings, groups, and individuals' behaviors, as well as face-to-face encounters with the participants. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed.

Data analysis began after spending several months in the field, when I shifted to a more systematic look at the compilation of my observations. To produce a coherent and focused analysis of the processes involved with the food practices among the groups in my study, analytical memos were used to sketch out ideas, themes, and patterns (Emerson et al., 1995).

In examining low-income food practices from a middle-class position, it seems logically necessary to address my 'food habitus' background. Like the scholars before me (Began, Power and Chapman, 2015, p. 83), I value contextualizing the researcher in the research. Briefly, my own food practices have shifted with the social class trajectory I have followed, which began with a low-income social class background. I was raised in a rural setting by a single mother, who, at times, was on food assistance. My own past came into mind several times throughout this study as I identified with my subjects in many respects. My non-threatening and empathetic approach is one that I hope allowed the participants in my study to feel at ease and share with me their truest 'food-selves.'

Table 1: Summary of Interviewee Characteristics

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>Employment Status</b>	<b>SNAP/ Family Size</b>

<b>Rural</b>						
Tracy	28	F	GED	Never married	Employed	\$340/2
Laura	25	F	Some college	Separated	Employed	\$440/5
Shelly	41	F	HS	Never married	Unemployed	\$200/2
Betsy	23	F	HS	Married	Unemployed	\$210/4
Ryan	62	F	HS	Married	Part-time	n/a
Dianna	59	F	HS	Married	Part-time	n/a
<b>Homeless</b>						
Shawn	54	M	HS	Never married	Unemployed	\$200/1
Paul	59	M	Some college	Divorced	Part-time	\$201/1
Henry	56	M	HS	Divorced	Part-time	\$200/1
Paolo	43	M	2 Bachelor's	Divorced	Unemployed	n/a
Emily	31	F	Some College	Divorced	Unemployed	\$300/3
Tina	41	F	HS	Divorced	Unemployed	\$300/3
Ella	29	F	>HS	Married	Unemployed	\$169/6
<b>Refugee</b>						
Ayan	28	F	>HS	Married	Unemployed	\$600/9
Michael	34	M	>HS	Never Married	Unemployed	\$32/1
Ira	21	F	Some College	Married	Unemployed	\$23/2
Rash	20	M	In Technical School	Married	Part-Time	\$29/1
Rata	44	M	>HS	Married	Employed	\$150/4
Tashi	44	M	>HS	Married	Employed	\$300/7
Dawa	22	F	>HS	Never	Unemployed	\$524/3
Mindu	38	F	>HS	Married	Employed	\$100/4
Sonam	37	F	>HS	Married	Employed	\$200/4

## RESULTS

To illustrate the heterogeneity in everyday food practices among the low-income groups in this study, three main characteristics are presented, to include: 1) time spent preparing and eating foods, 2) food item types, and 3) cooking skills. In exploring these characteristics across the rural, homeless, and refugee groups, one can see that each group has distinct and differing food practices. It is worth noting that the examination of time as a food practice characteristic follows the work of Bourdieu (e.g. Bourdieu, 1984, p. 186).

### *Rural Group*

Not having money to buy food is hard. Each group in this study, particularly the rural group, suffered from not always having enough money to buy the foods they wanted. Many of the rural individuals I spent time with were caught in a vicious cycle of poverty; they grew up in households that needed food assistance and now as adults, they, too, need food assistance. A poignant example of the food hardships found among the rural group was articulated by a 26-year-old single mother of three, who grew up in a low-income household when she sadly remarked that she “usually only has fresh, fresh fruits and vegetables in [the] house...one to two times a month.”

Due to familial backgrounds and economic conditions, the rural cooking class participants' food practices can be typified as one with little time and labor investment in food when compared to the other two groups. For example, one pattern that emerged from the data was how little time was spent preparing and eating meals, and that the group tended to choose easy and inexpensive foods. For example, I found that nearly half of the foods observed and talked about (21 food items out of a total of 48), were quick, inexpensive, often pre-packaged food items (e.g. Macaroni and Cheese, Cup-of-soup™, Ramen Noodles™, Debbie's Cakes™, Mountain Dew™). Betsy, a 23-year old pregnant mother of two, illustrates this point in explaining that Banquet Meals™ (pre-packaged frozen meals) are popular with her children. She said:

They're like Kids Cuisine™, you know what them are? They're just cheaper than Kids Cuisine™; they're like a dollar instead of 4 dollars...and they like um, if [the kids] eat 2 or 3 a day, I'm happy.

Like Betsy, Laura, a 25-year-old, full-time working mother of three, also talked about making quick, inexpensive, meals for her family. She stated:

Pasta is a huge filler in my house, four out of seven meals a week probably because it's a filler, and for a family of five, I have to cook a pretty big packet of whatever the main dish is, so pastas a filler. So, like, like I give a plate to the kids and if they want more sometimes, I don't have enough meat, there's pasta and maybe more vegetables.

In addition to easy and inexpensive foods that required little time or labor investment, the rural group had relatively short mealtimes. At the end of each cooking class, the participants would sit down together to eat the meal they had just prepared. Based on these meals, a pattern of quick eating was observed, where the rural group spent approximately 12-15 minutes eating. For the rural cooking class participants, along with the homeless shelter residents discussed below, eating seems to be an activity to feed the body, or as Bourdieu writes, the individuals in these groups seem to have the "taste of necessity" (Bourdieu, 1979/84, p. 6). In other words, a habitus of feeding the body to feel full and eating to satiate the body in an economical way versus concern for the aesthetic presentation, or health, for example. This pattern was not found among the refugee group.

Lastly, limited cooking skills were found among the rural group based on observations of uneasiness and discomfort in cooking. For example, group members were unsure of what certain cooking utensils are, or how to use them. A subtle, yet telling, illustration of limited cooking skills was demonstrated by one of the cooking class participants during an evening class in the kitchen. The participant's task was to grate carrots for one of the dishes being prepared. When she was handed a small metal grater, with a serious and sincere look, she quietly asked, "Which side do I use?" as she held the grater in front of her, unsure of where and how to position it. Her uncertainty with the grater does not mean that she lacked interest in cooking or learning how to cook, but that she has had little exposure to, or experience in cooking, or using a grater. Thus, the cooking skills displayed here are not necessarily synonymous with being uninterested in learning how to cook. Furthermore, the food practices of the low-income rural group are, in many ways, extensions of the food milieu they grew up in, and practices that differ from the homeless and refugee groups.

### *Homeless Group*

“The home is the center of life” (Desmond, 2016, p. 294). It is where we gather, feel at ease, and at times, prepare and eat our food. Without the home, when one is homeless, the insecurities are countless. The homeless individuals in this study faced hardships just as substantial as the rural group; however, the hardships were of a different type and variety. When it comes to food, the homeless individuals in my study generally had positive things to say about the food they ate at the shelter. One male resident stating that he thought the food at the shelter was ‘awesome’ and another resident said that “the food [at the shelter] is wonderful. Everybody gets fat, nobody gets skinny.” Generally, the residents felt the food was healthy, tasty (most of the time), and many of them said they were grateful for their meals.

The shelter’s kitchen program, like when and how meals were going to get made, was unclear at times. There was a running joke that while the shelter kitchen was ‘where it all happens’, the operational structure of the kitchen was chaotic at times. For example, on some nights there ‘were too many cooks in the kitchen’ and yet on others, there was a scramble to figure out who was going to oversee the night’s meal. Generally speaking, however, meals at the homeless shelter are either prepared by the homeless shelter residents, or what they refer to as ‘a resident cook,’ or donated by local individuals and groups. When meals are dropped off, or a local volunteer cooks the meal and then leaves right afterwards, without staying to serve or eat the meal, the residents jokingly refer to it as a ‘a cook-and-book.’

The food practices found at the homeless shelter are ones that might be expected in an institutional, industrial kitchen setting. For example, the most notable pattern that distinguished the homeless group from the other two groups is the variety of foods observed and talked about. For example, food items ranged from meals like lasagna, baked ziti, chicken casseroles, and haddock to collard greens, cucumbers, Lucky Charms™, and Gushers™. The homeless shelter also had the highest total number of food items observed and talked about (96 food items). One of the resident cooks, a 54 year-old-male named Shawn, noted that while there was a great variety of foods that passed through the shelter, he found that the residents “liked plain food, nothing fancy.” He said, “[We] like macaroni and cheese, [we] like spaghetti and sauce, [we] like steak and potatoes.” Irrespective of the meal being prepared, however, meal preparation at the shelter was typically a long process.

Meal preparation at the shelter took a long time. There was a notable contrast in the time it took to prepare meals versus the time spent eating meals. For example, the time spent preparing and cooking meals was on average three hours, yet like the rural group, the homeless residents took approximately 12-15 minutes to eat. During one field site visit at the homeless shelter I noted the interesting contrast between the ‘buzz’ and energy that went into getting the meal ready and the subdued atmosphere when the shelter residents were eating, captured in this short excerpt:

I noticed that the group eats very quickly...It took the group about 12-15 minutes to eat. It was pretty quiet and what I would call functional – eating to eat.

Like the rural group, food was functional for the residents – “the taste of necessity” - to keep their bodies going, for survival. While the rural and homeless groups ate quickly and quietly, characterized more by an individual versus a communal experience, it is worth noting that quick eating has been attributed to American culture. For example, Americans, in general, are spending less time, and money, on cooking and eating when compared to their past and other developed



nations (e.g. the French/French Paradox) (Pollan, 2008, p. 183; Rozen et al., 2003). In fact, for many Americans, the sit-down, collective, shared meal has been replaced by ‘eating occasions’, which is marked by eating alone or on the go (Pollan, 2008, p. 189). Thus, the quiet, quick, individualized eating pattern observed in the homeless and rural groups maybe emblematic of a larger cultural trend versus a homeless shelter eating characteristics. Like the diversity of foods found at the shelter, and the varying times spent preparing versus eating meals, so too, was there a range of cooking skills found at the shelter.

As noted, at the shelter, there were resident cooks with a high level of cooking skills to cook for an average group size of 20 or more people, and yet others who expressed little interest in cooking. Ella, a 29-year-old, African American mother of five, for example, said that she is “used to cooking dinner for [her] kids” and her “kids were always used to [her] cooking,” but since coming to the shelter, she has no interest in cooking. She stated:

When the weather was warm, we would do a lot of grilling. You know, hamburgers, chicken, fish, chicken burgers, turkey burgers, you know I would make pasta salads, potatoes salads. You know I love to bake, try new things, I love to make casseroles, I love chili, I love lasagna, um, baked ziti, fried chicken...I used to do big breakfasts for my family, huge breakfasts like I’m talkin’ pancakes, sausage, bacon, hash brown, grits, biscuits.

However, since being at the shelter, she said she has no inspiration to cook. She explained that at first, she tried to cook for her family using their shelter unit’s kitchenette, but because that space is communal, the kitchen was always unclean, stating that “people wasn’t washin’ their dishes and oh my god it was a nightmare.” This mother links her lack of desire to cook to the specific social context she is in, the homeless shelter. She does, however, come from a ‘long line of cooks’ in her family and is proud of her cooking skills. Simply put, this mother is an example of a low-income woman who knows how to cook, enjoys cooking for her family, but given her current circumstance, is disinterested in the prospect of making a meal.

The homeless group’s food culture is as dynamic as the individuals who shelter there. Mainly, varied foods and cooking skills, along with long food preparation times, yet quick eating characterize the individuals I observed at the shelter. One could reasonably argue that these are attributes of an institutional setting with an industrial kitchen or even, perhaps, of American culture at large; however, the observations illustrate how food practices vary among different low-income groups.

### *Refugee Group*

The refugee individuals in this study are from countries such as Bhutan, Burundi, and Somalia, with a tradition steeped in agriculture, farming, and growing food. While the rural individuals in this study have been socialized in the cycle of poverty and food assistance, the refugees have been immersed in a culture of growing food. During one of my first field site visits to the refugee community garden, a male gardener summarized this sentiment clearly in stating, “We are agrarian people.”

Growing food as a cultural tradition, as well as the hardships refugees face with a short growing season, was articulated by Pam, the Refugee Garden Manager, when she said:

[The refugee gardeners] all come from places where gardening is a year-round occupation. They are used to having fresh fruits and vegetables in their diet. They want to keep that part alive, you know, in their new land. Surely you can't grow everything here, like nobody did a successful mango this year...it takes a little while to get people to understand that yes, when it snows your garden is going to die, even before that it's going to die.

And, while the growing season is shorter than any of the refugee would like, one of the food characteristics found among the refugee gardeners, unsurprisingly, is that many of the food items observed and talked about were garden-grown foods (e.g. kale, mustard leaves, lettuce, tomatoes, zucchini). Interestingly, inverse to the rural group, more than half of the food items observed (32 food items out of a total of 49) were raw foods. Additionally, unlike the rural group, and in part the homeless group, the refugee group spent a great deal of their time on food activities. This time investment included both preparing and eating meals. For example, the refugee group spent approximately 30-60 minutes eating their meals, most often in a communal setting (e.g. family dinner, pot-luck gatherings, celebrating Diwali -the Hindu festival of lights). Spending time preparing foods is something that Rata, a 44 year-old refugee male from Bhutan, feels is important to his culture. He said,

The American food is not known to us. It, to me...as a vegetarian, I am a vegetarian, so we are not a big culture to go to restaurant to eat...so, we make food at home and uh, we prepare at home...

The members of this group, as Rata notes, spend time preparing meals at home (e.g. various curry dishes), often with vegetables grown in their garden. Ira, a 21 year-old, female Bhutanese refugee, also explains that everyone in her household spends time cooking and eating together.

Ira lives in a small two-bedroom apartment with her husband and his brother, sister, and mother. In their modest apartment she explained that "Sometime if I don't get time, [my husband will] cook, when he doesn't get time, my mother-in-law cooks. My brother, my sister, everybody cooks." In addition to everyone in her household cooking, Ira also explained that meals are often communal and shared. Although each family member has a different work schedule, those that are home during mealtime, sit together at their kitchen table to eat. This was exemplified during my home visit with Ira, as we sat for approximately 30 minutes together, having lunch.

Compared to the other two groups, I spent the greatest proportion of time observing the refugees as they cooked and ate. The most illustrative example of both cooking skills and the socialized process of passing these skills from one generation to another was during a home observation at Ayan's house. Ayan is a 28 year-old Somali Bantu refugee with eight children. In her kitchen there were no expensive appliances, kitchen equipment, or decorations. The counters were barren and the food was in its raw form, with little pre-prepared or pre-packaged food. An excerpt from my field notes, on an evening with Ayan as she and her oldest daughter cooked dinner, reveals her cooking skills and the ingrained ease her daughter has in preparing food:

A large bag of rice sits next to the stove. Ayan takes a bowl to the canvas bag of rice and scoops six handfuls of rice into the bowl for the nine people she will be serving. She used a wooden spoon to mix the rice with a little salt. Without a recipe, she flawlessly moves around the kitchen making dinner. Every burner on the stove is filled with pots in various sizes. There is an orchestra of sound made by the cooking utensil instruments. There is also a kettle boiling water. Her

daughter cuts potatoes with a small red paring knife. Ayan pours hot water from the kettle onto the rice and it starts to boil. On a cutting board, on the small counter between the oven and sink, Ayan slices cloves of garlic. She then puts the slices into a small bowl and with the end of her rolling pin crushes the garlic, pounding the handle of the rolling pin over and over into the bowl on the small pieces of garlic. Her eldest daughter stands at the counter at the far side of the kitchen. She has peeled the potatoes.

The two women work mostly in silence. Ayan's teenage daughter moves about the kitchen without direction, suggesting this is their shared nightly routine in the kitchen. The women make an African dish of rice, potatoes, onions, and garlic but instead of using a tomato sauce made from scratch (as Ayan would have liked), they use spaghetti sauce flavored with bouillon cubes. The time investment in growing, preparing and eating food along with a heritage of cooking skills, captures a food habitus unlike the rural and homeless groups in this study. The refugee community gardeners did not appear to have more time to do food-related activities *per se*, but rather that food is such a central part of their lives and culture that any spare time (e.g. evenings, weekends) is spent doing food-related activities (e.g. gardening, making food).

## CONCLUSION

The relevance of this article is its illustration of how food practices vary among distinct groups within the same low-income category. By an in-depth analysis based on observations and interviews among a rural group, a homeless group, and a refugee group, I found differences in time spent cooking and eating, food item types, and cooking skills. This research adds to the growing body of literature that suggests that a dichotomous tendency to view the diets of higher-SES groups as moral, just, and healthy and those of lower-SES groups as unhealthy and of 'bad taste,' is an inaccurate depiction of food practices among lower-income individual and families (Maguire 2016).

In exploring the everyday food practices of the low-income groups in this study, I describe the heterogeneity in food practices found. The rural group opted for quick and easy food items symbolic of the modern industrial 'pre-made' and 'pre-packaged' food system with cost consideration in mind. The rural group, like the homeless group, has a taste and food habitus described by Bourdieu as a 'taste of necessity.' In using a Bourdieusian approach, others have also found low-SES groups that prefer low-cost foods that are easy, efficient, and accessible (Boumann, Szabo & Johnson 2017, p. 15). Unlike previous work, however, when examining low-income groups within a specific geo-social context, it was found that the refugee group did not share the same taste of necessity as the rural and homeless groups.

The refugee community gardeners displayed food practices that are in continuity with their comparatively greater immersion in, and connection to, food work. For example, the food practices of the refugees, one deeply connected to the land and a culture of growing food, is more communal with much more time spent preparing and eating food. The group ate more raw fruits and vegetables, often grown from their gardens, and the food was the centerpiece of their lives. The refugee gardeners' food habitus can be typified by time spent cooking and eating, and by extension, extensive cooking skills. This, too, is a finding that echoes previous work (e.g. Stead, Caraher & Anderson 2004), in that the individuals in this study had different levels of cooking skills: while some seemed uneasy in the kitchen like the rural mother, others longed to

cook but were uninspired due to their current social context (e.g. a homeless shelter), and even still others who demonstrated ease, familiarity, and comfort in cooking.

### *Limitations & Future Studies*

The limitations of this study also serve as a discussion point. One limitation of this study is the inability to disentangle the findings from the specific geo-social locations in which they were found. For example, it is unclear how conceptually meaningful the groups discussed in this paper are. The food practices discussed among the rural group in this study are not necessarily related to 'being rural.' Previous research shows that there are many types of 'rural,' defined not only by geographic location but also by their distinct economic and cultural characteristics (Hamilton, Hamilton, Duncan and Colocousis, 2008). The purpose of this research was an in-depth exploration of how food practices vary among groups within the same economic category, however, one still must wonder how other socio-cultural variables – gender, ethnicity, age, education etc. – influence the food practices observed.

Conversely, does examining different groups of the same low-income strata offer a way to examine the intersection of income, geographic location, gender, race, ethnicity etc.? For example, further research could continue to document other groups susceptible to lower incomes and food insecurity (e.g. senior citizens, single mothers, veterans, first generation college students). Perhaps there is strength in describing food practices within a specific social setting. Thus, in knowing the food practices of specific groups, we can better serve those in need with a tailored approach. For example, could it be helpful for local anti-hunger groups to know the specific food-related needs of a rural group versus a refugee group?

In this vein, it is also recommended that future research adopt a participatory health research (PHR) model. Public health researchers argue that the best health interventions are those that invite the people affected by a particular problem to participate (e.g. Syme and Ritterman, 2009); thus, engaging the target populations most affected by negative health consequences. Soliciting the help of SNAP/Food Stamp participants can better define how to help those in need. By exploring what is working and what is not working from the perspective of those most closely involved with the program, perhaps we could discover a more robust and diversified set of interventions to combat public health issues, like food insecurity and diet-related disease.

The voices in this study frequently talked about what would help increase their food security, ranging in scale from federal assistance programs to smaller community-based initiatives. Here are just a few recommendations given by the people in my study. First, one full-time working mother of three said her greatest barrier to food security was affordable childcare. Another rural participant said that our society needs more low-income cooking classes. This individual, having been a cooking class participant herself, talked about how learning how to cook nutritious meals on a budget has improved her health, food security, and wallet. Increasing the number of low-income cooking classes is a cost-effective, community-centered approach to combatting food insecurity.

To make getting food easier, the homeless group gave an unequivocal response: affordable housing. There is no novelty in writing about the need for affordable housing. As a society, we know that "the home is the wellspring of personhood" (Desmond, 2016, p. 293), and by interpolation without a space of one's own to make food, eat, and feel at ease doing so, naturally there is a sense of food insecurity. What is significant about affordable housing as the recommendation from those directly experiencing homelessness, is that both policy makers and the marginalized communities suffering from the void, know it. Affordable housing maybe a

tired social issue, but like an illness without medication, it is not going away. Better public housing policies are at the core of public health issues like food insecurity.

The refugee community gardeners did not talk about affordable housing but did express the need for more federal assistance in the form of food dollars. When talking about how much federal food assistance they received, I often heard “it’s not enough,” and by end of the month they may have rice but that “the vegetables are not in stock.” Additionally, one participant recommended increasing the number of community gardens, suggesting that every churchyard have a garden. To alleviate the risk of food insecurity during the winter months for the refugee group, one participant talked about canning classes to preserve their own food for the colder months. For those that love to grow food, it is a dark paradox that they would ever experience food insecurity. A food assistance program that fits the needs of the refugee group could be increasing federal food dollars during the winter months, as well as providing initiatives and resources for preserving food.

Clearly, based on the findings from this study, there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to addressing food insecurity. A suite of interventions, solutions, and initiatives are needed at multiple scales: federal, state, and local. Given the escalating trends in diet-related illnesses (CDC, 2016) and the number of low-income households in need of food and nutritional assistance (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2016), documenting the day-to-day reality of food on the ground is increasingly necessary. Understanding more about low-income food practices can alert policymakers that no single intervention is necessarily effective for all low-income groups.

**Acknowledgments:** Thank you to Professor Michele Dillon and Professor Joanne Burke for your tireless guidance and help with this research, and to Beth Dietrich and Eliot Sloan, for your thoughtful comments, edits, and suggestions on this paper.

## References

- ALKON, A., BLOCK, D., MOORE, K., GILLIS, C., DINUCCIO, N. and CHAVES, N. (2013). Foodways of the urban poor. *Geoforum*, 48, pp. 126-135.
- BAUMANN, S., SZABO, M. and JOHNSTON, J. (2017). Understanding the food preferences of people of low socioeconomic status. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, Online First.
- BEAGAN, B. L., CHAPMAN, G. E., JOHNSTON, J., MCPHAIL, D., POWER, E. M. and VALLIANATOS, H. (2014). *Acquired tastes: Why families eat the way they do*. UBC Press.
- BEAGAN, B. L., POWER, E. M. and CHAPMAN, G. E. (2015). Eating isn’t just swallowing food: Food practices in the context of social class trajectory. *Canadian Food Studies*, 2(1), 75-98.
- BOURDIEU, Pierre. (1979/1984) *Distinction: A social critique of the judgment of taste*. London: Routledge.
- BRIONES, A. E., COCKX, L. and SWINNEN, J. (2018). Culture and Food Security. *Global Food Security*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gfs.2018.02.002>.
- Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2016) *Overweight and Obesity: Adult Obesity Facts*. Retrieved February 2017 from: <http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/adult.html>.
- COLEMAN-JENSEN, A., RABBITT, M. P., Gregory, C. and Singh, A. (2017) *Household Food Security in the United States in 2016*, ERR-237, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/84973/err-237.pdf?v=42979>.
- Cooking Matters™. (2011) *Cooking Matters for Families Instructor Guide*. Washington, DC: Share our Strength™.
- CROTTY, P. and GERMOV, J. (2004). Food and Class In J. Germov, & L. Williams, *A Sociology of food and nutrition*, (pp. 241-262). Victoria, Australia: Oxford University Press.
- DANIEL, C. (2016). Economic constraints on taste formation and the true cost of healthy eating. *Social Science & Medicine*, 148, 34-41.

- DARMON, N. and DREWNOWSKI, A. (2008) Does social class predict diet quality? *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, 87 (5), pp. 1107-1117.
- DESMOND, Matthew. (2016). *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*. New York: Penguin Random House.
- DILLON, M. (2010). *Introduction to social theory*. West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.
- EMERSON, R., FRETZ R. and SHAW, L. (1995). *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- ENGLER-STRINGER, R. (2010). Food, cooking skills, and health: a literature review. *Canadian journal of Dietetic practice and research*, 71(3), pp. 141-145.
- ESALA, J. (2011). How Far Would You Drive for Fresh Food? How Some Rural New Hampshire Residents Navigate a Dismal Food Landscape. University of New Hampshire Carsey Institute. New England Brief: 25. Retrieved May 2017 (<http://scholars.unh.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1127&context=carsey>)
- HAMILTON, LAWRENCE, HAMILTON, L., DUNCAN, C. and COLOCOUSIS, C. (2008) Place Matters Challenges and Opportunities in Four Rural Americas. A Carsey Institute Report on Rural America 4:1.
- HUPKENS, C., KNIBBE R. and DROP, M.J. (2000). Social Class Differences in Food Consumption. *European Journal of Public Health*, 10 (2), pp. 108-113.
- INNESS, Sherrie. (2001) *Kitchen Culture In America: Popular Representations of Food, Gender, and Race*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- LYON, P., COLQUHOUN A. and ALEXANDER E. (2003) Deskillling the domestic kitchen: national tragedy or the making of a modern myth? *Food Services Technology* 3, pp. 167-175.
- OGDEN, C., LAMB M., CARROLL, M. and FLEGAL, K. (2010). Obesity and Socioeconomic Status in Adults: United States, 2005–2008. Center of Disease and Control Prevention (CDC).
- POLLAN, M. (2008). *In Defense of Food: An Eater’s Manifesto*. Penguin Group: New York, NY.
- PRATTALA, R., BERG, M. and PUSKA, P. (1992) Diminishing or Increasing Contrasts? Social Class Variations in Finnish Food Consumption Patterns. *European Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, 46, pp. 279-87.
- ROZIN, P., KABNICK, K., PETE, E., FISCHLER, C. and SHIELDS, C. (2003). The ecology of eating: smaller portion sizes in France Than in the United States help explain the French paradox. *Psychological science*, 14 5, pp. 450-4.
- ROOS, E., LAHELMA, E., VIRTANEN, M, PRATTALA, R. and PIETINEN, P. (1998) Gender, socioeconomic status and family status as determinants of food behavior. *Social Science & Medicine* 46 (12), pp. 1519-1529.
- SHELDON M, GANS, K.M., TAI R., GEORGE T., LAWSON E., and PEARLMAN, D.N. (2010). Availability, affordability, and accessibility of a healthful diet in a low-income community, Central Falls, Rhode Island, 2007-2008. *Preventing Chronic Diseases*, 7(2): A43.
- SMITH A. M. and BAGHURST, K. I. (1992) Public Health Implications of Dietary Differences Between Social Status and Occupation Category Groups. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, 46, pp. 409-16. DOI: 10.1136/jech.46.4.409
- SMITH, MAGUIRE, J. (2016). Introduction: looking at food practices and taste across the class divide. *Food, Culture & Society*, 19(1), pp. 11-18.
- STEAD, M., CARAHER, M., WRIEDEN, W., LONGBOTTOM, P., VALENTINE, K. and ANDERSON, A. (2004). Confident, fearful and hopeless cooks: findings from the development of a food-skills initiative. *British Food Journal*, 106 (4), pp. 274-287.
- STEWART, H., HYMAN, J., FRASAO, E., BUZBY JC. and CARLSON, A., (2011). Can low-income Americans afford to satisfy MyPyramid fruit and vegetable guidelines? *Journal of Nutrition Education Behavior*, 43 (3), pp. 173-179.
- SWIDLER, A. (1986) *Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies*. *Sociological Review*, 51: (2) pp. 273-286.
- SYME, L. and RITTERMAN M. L. (2009). The Importance of Community Development For Health and Well-Being” *Community Development Investment Review*, 5:3.
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2017) *Poverty Guidelines: U.S. Federal Poverty Guidelines Used To Determine Financial Eligibility for Certain Federal Programs*. Retrieved May 2018: <https://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty-guidelines>

---

<sup>i</sup> Currently, in the United States, approximately 12.3% of all households are food-insecure, “meaning that at times the food intake of one or more household members was reduced and their eating patterns were disrupted because the household lacked money and other resources for obtaining food” (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2017: i).