



## Choosing hunger

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### ABSTRACT

In much of the academic literature, hunger is treated as a problematic condition that affects people against their will. However, this focus ignores the many instances in which people actively choose to go hungry. The clearest examples are cases – such as dieters, hunger artists, and religious fasters – in which the choice seems voluntary. Yet people forced into famine or starved in concentration camps also make critical, though often subtle trade-offs related to hunger. This paper explores two fundamental characteristics that help to clarify the differences between various cases of hunger: the degree of choice and the severity of the consequences. By emphasizing the centrality of choice and providing a framework for the analysis of various situations, the paper argues for a re-examination of the concept of hunger.

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### 1. Introduction

In Franz Kafka's short story "A hunger artist" (n.d.), the narrator laments the decline of public interest in professional fasting:

It used to pay very well to stage such great performances under one's own management, but today that is quite impossible. We live in a different world now. At one time the whole town took a lively interest in the hunger artist; from day to day of his fast the excitement mounted; everybody wanted to see him at least once a day; there were people who bought season tickets for the last few days and sat from morning till night in front of his small barred cage . . . At any rate the pampered hunger artist suddenly found himself deserted one fine day by the amusement seekers, who went streaming past him to other more favored attractions.

Although increasingly neglected and relegated to a circus, the hunger artist continues his fasting efforts, surpassing the endurance records of his previous performances. Eventually, he dies in his cage under a pile of straw.<sup>1</sup>

Whatever his motivation or the allegorical interpretations of this story, his conscious decision to engage in fasting is representative of a wider range of people who choose hunger – whether modern hunger artists such as David Blaine, hunger strikers such as Bobby Sands, religious fasters such as Muslims during Ramadan, or dieters. These cases of voluntary hunger have to a large extent been understandably ignored in the food security literature; the more pressing concern of humanitarian and development researchers is involuntary hunger leading to irreversible damage, including a risk of mortality. Yet these seemingly distinct categorizations can be misleading. Hunger strikes can result in severe consequences, such as death,

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<sup>1</sup> Russel (2005) also quotes from this short story and touches upon several of the other examples used in this paper in her rich account of hunger.

while people forced into famine or starved in concentration camps make critical, though often subtle, trade-offs related to hunger. The current approach has obscured the role of choice in cases viewed as involuntary hunger and the potentially concerning consequences in cases of voluntary hunger.

This paper identifies two critical factors that characterize hunger: the degree of choice and the severity of the consequences. Applying this framework, it is possible to clarify the differences between various hunger situations and to identify appropriate responses for particular circumstances.

The paper is organized into six sections. Following this introduction, the next section reviews the relevant literature that informs our examination of hunger choices and severities. The third section lays out a framework for understanding the range of hunger situations. The fourth section applies this framework to a number of specific cases, outlining a means for categorizing different instances of hunger, while a fifth summarizes the implications for response. The final section concludes by highlighting the main findings of the paper.

## 2. Literature review

There are three broad strands of literature relating to the role of choice in hunger<sup>2</sup> that have informed the design of that component of the framework. The first is the food security literature, where the discussion of choice has been somewhat limited; the second is the decision theory literature, where there are relatively few references made to food security; the third comprises specialist literatures on topics such as concentration camps and fasting, which fall outside the domain of food security or decision theory but provide insight into the intersection of these topics. The work on different measures of the impact of hunger has helped guide the development of the other component of the framework on the severity of consequences.

### 2.1. Food security literature

At the start of *Hunger in History*, Millman and Kates (1990) make a distinction between two types of hunger – voluntary and involuntary – and clarify that the volume is concerned with the latter. Their approach is broadly representative of most academic literature on food security that often implicitly assumes the issue of concern is involuntary hunger and its damaging consequences.

In a characteristic description of the focus and underlying assumptions of the literature, Dreze and Sen in *Hunger and Public Action* (1989) argue that

[h]unger is not a modern malady. Hunger is, however, intolerable in the modern world in a way that it could not have been in the past. This is not so much because it is more intense, but because widespread hunger is

so unnecessary and unwarranted in the modern world. The enormous expansion of productive power that has taken place over the last few centuries has made it, perhaps for the first time, possible to guarantee adequate food for all (Dreze, 1989, p. 3).

The understanding is that hunger is a pernicious problem that affects people against their will. Although employing different theoretical frameworks, and making varied recommendations, other seminal works reflect a similar view of hunger (de Waal, 1989, 1997; Devereux, 2007; Keen, 1994; Sen, 1981; The Lancet, 2013).

While involuntary hunger has been the predominant focus of the academic literature on food insecurity, at least five sub-literatures acknowledge a degree of choice in decisions. An important example is the sub-literature on coping strategies that gained prominence in the 1980s and 1990s. During the 1980s, there was growing recognition that populations affected by food crises did not respond passively to their circumstances, but engaged in a complex set of trade-offs to forestall the most severe consequences of emergencies. Surveying the coping strategies utilized in different contexts, researchers (Corbett, 1988; Walker, 1989; Watts, 1983) identified consistent patterns in the sequence in which they were employed. The literature argued that broadly speaking people began with reversible coping strategies, such as reducing the size and number of meals, which required immediate sacrifices in terms of hunger but preserved their long-term livelihoods. When the situation deteriorated beyond a certain point, however, they started to use irreversible strategies, such as selling land, essential livestock, or agricultural tools in order to address their immediate needs but at the expense of their livelihoods and therefore their future ability to secure adequate food. Subsequent studies have broadened and nuanced the understanding of the trade-offs involved (Curtis, 1995; Davies, 1996; Devereux, 1993; Howe, 2002; Maxwell, 1996; Payne & Lipton, 1994).

A related sub-literature focuses on intra-household distribution of food. Studies find that certain family members, often adult males or male children, receive priority for the limited amounts of food available (Basu et al., 1986; Berti, 2012; Bouis & Haddad, 1990; Harriss, 1991; Sen, 1984), though in some cases the intra-household distribution is equitable or gives preference to daughters (Villa, Barrett, & Just, 2011). Other studies (Hampshire, Casiday, Kilpatrick, & Panter-Brick, 2009) have identified a range of constraints facing parents that can contribute to poor care practices and malnutrition for young children of either sex. A third sub-literature on agricultural economics has examined the decision problems of farmers to better understand the factors that influence the way they manage risk (Hardaker et al., 2004, as cited in Van Winsen et al., 2013). It has been applied in developing countries to decisions on a variety of topics ranging from resource allocation in contract farming (Huh & Lall, 2013) to the adoption of new varieties (Abebe, Bijman, Pascucci, & Omta, 2013). These studies are typically based on a quantitative, rational choice model (Van Winsen et al., 2013).

A fourth sub-literature seeks to understand the impact of various policy options on food security-related goals

<sup>2</sup> Hunger is “a condition in which people lack the required nutrients, both macro (protein, carbohydrates and fats) and micro (vitamins and minerals) for fully productive, active and healthy lives” (WFP, 2006, p. 14).

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