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# Culture and food security☆

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews available cross-disciplinary evidence on how culture affects food security. We discuss the impact of culture on all four dimensions (availability, access and choice, utilization, and stability). There is large heterogeneity in the size and breadth of available evidence, with research often biased toward high-come countries. The dynamics as well as the magnitude and relative importance of cultural effects on food security are still poorly understood. Despite these gaps in the literature, it is clear that how and why we obtain, process, prepare, and eat food is influenced by culture in various ways. Gender, family, and decision-making power play a critical role in interacting with culture and its impact on food security. There remains ample scope for improving food security policy by taking culture better into account.

## 1. Introduction

Food is intimately related to human culture (e.g. Feeley-Harnik, 1995; Fieldhouse, 1995; Kittler et al., 2011; Mintz and Du Bois, 2002). Improving our understanding of the cultural dimension of food security is therefore increasingly recognized as an essential part of moving towards sustainable healthier diets for all (e.g. Helman, 2007; Keding et al., 2013). This evolution is reflected in the fact that culture is now commonly mentioned as one of the '*deep drivers*' of food security in conceptual frameworks (e.g. WFP, 2012).

Yet, in spite of this growing recognition, culture has too often remained on the fringes of discussions on the fight against malnutrition among policy-makers and researchers. There are many examples of well-intended food security interventions that failed because they did not take cultural settings into account (e.g. UN, 2013) from rejected deliveries of culturally inappropriate food aid to disregard for dietary recommendations that conflict with the cultural meaning of certain foods. A typical shortcoming is that the frameworks that identify culture as an important driver rarely clarify through what specific channels it affects food security, nor how important its influence is relative to other factors. Put differently, it has been widely acknowledged that culture matters, but the questions of *in what ways* and *to what extent* it matters remain largely unanswered.

This lacuna may, to some degree, be related to difficulties in operationalizing and measuring such a comprehensive concept (Alesina and Giuliano, 2015; Guiso et al., 2006). Yet, various disciplines have made significant progress in developing theories, models, and instruments to analyze and measure culture qualitatively and quantitatively. In addition, there is a vast and growing body of literature investigating different aspects of culture in relation to several dimensions and drivers of food security. The problem is therefore not absence of research. The issue may rather be that research is scattered across a wide range of disciplines (from anthropology to biochemistry), research topics (from food processing to media and marketing), and types of research.[1] This dispersion makes it difficult to take stock of the current state of knowledge regarding the impact of culture on food security.

To our knowledge, this paper will be the first to provide an overview of the available evidence on the impact of culture on food security by bringing together these distinct types of research from a range of different disciplines. Since the body of relevant literature is vast, the first step in this process is to determine the scope of our review. We focus our review on the impact of culture on the determinants of dietary

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[1] One type of studies reviews the impact of cultural factors on one or a few specific drivers of food security across countries – although the focus is often on high-income countries (e.g. Nestle et al., 1998). Another type of research takes the form of detailed case studies on how culture affects a large number of food security drivers for a particular cultural group (e.g. Gittelsohn et al., 2003). These studies generally take a broad approach in terms of cultural factors considered, but have a limited focus in the sense that they are highly specific to the population under study.

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intake at the household and individual level[2] and how the current state of knowledge can inform policy making. Although we have tried to use a broad, interdisciplinary approach to account for the complex and multifaceted nature of both culture and food security, as economists, our discussion relies strongly on language and concepts common in our field.

This paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews definitions culture and food security. Section 3 discusses the different pathways through which culture affects food security. Section 4 focuses on the role of gender, family and decision-making power. The dynamic aspects of culture and drivers of change, including the role of mass media and marketing, are explored in Section 5. Section 6 concludes and presents the implications for policy and future research.

## 2. Definitions of culture and food security

### 2.1. Culture

In the words of Alesina and Giuliano (2015: 899): "*Defining culture is an arduous task*". There is no universally accepted definition, and different disciplines have defined this complex construct in numerous ways. While some interpretations focus on the core concepts of values, beliefs and norms, others view culture more broadly as all socially transmitted information. The first approach is common within economics, as is illustrated by the definition used by Gorodnichenko and Roland (2010: 1): "*the set of values and beliefs people have about how the world (both nature and society) works as well as the norms of behavior derived from that set of values*". The psychological literature tends to emphasize the role of culture in motivating human behavior. Matsumoto and Juang (2013: 15) for instance define culture as "*a unique meaning and information system, shared by a group and transmitted across generations, that allows the group to meet basic needs of survival, pursue happiness and well-being, and derive meaning from life.*" Other strands of research, including bio-cultural evolutionary work, stress the informational content of culture. Boyd and Richerson (2004) for instance define culture as "*information that people acquire from others by teaching, imitation, and other forms of social learning*".

With each approach having its strengths and weaknesses, the question of how to define culture in itself can be the subject of a review paper (e.g. Taras et al., 2009). For the sake of brevity and given the broad and interdisciplinary nature of this review, we therefore refrain from giving a strict definition of culture. Rather, we continue by discussing a number of points that we deem important for clarifying and delineating our understanding of culture.

First, we consider the social transmission of information as a crucial aspect of culture. Specific culture traits such as values, beliefs, and behavioral norms can be thought of as ways of transmitting information, both within and across generations, about how the world works and what is good and bad, right and wrong, or valuable and invaluable. Such traits and the information embedded therein aggregate into cultural models that explain a certain aspect of life (e.g. pregnancy, infant feeding, and illness) and mediate and regulate associated behavior (D'Andrade and Strauss, 1992; Fryberg and Markus, 2007). Research on culture and food security often gives importance to a particular type of culturally embedded information that is built on long periods of experimentation, observation, and learning across generations (Becker and Ghimire, 2003; Berkes, 2012; Mazzocchi, 2006). To distinguish this type of information from knowledge acquired through modern scientific methods, various terms are used, such as *traditional knowledge, indigenous knowledge and local knowledge*, each having its own imperfections. We use the term 'traditional knowledge' throughout the paper to emphasize the process of knowledge building and transmission along a cultural continuity (Berkes, 2012; Mazzocchi, 2006).

A second important aspect of culture is its dynamic nature. Although culture can be remarkably persistent, it is inherently evolving; it is shaped and reshaped by the social, political, economic and ecological environment and in turn (re)shapes this environment. To take a specific example, traditional knowledge is not a static or fixed body of information, but should rather be understood as a dynamic learning process that responds to changing circumstances and needs of the group (Becker and Ghimire, 2003; Berkes, 2012).

The third point is aptly described by Weisner (2000: 142): "*Cultures may have a clear central tendency and normative pattern, but they are hardly monolithic and uniform*". In practice culture is a heterogeneous mix of different cultural models that may concur or conflict with each other. Hence, one can find substantial cultural differences within relatively small groups, and intra-group differences are generally larger than inter-group differences (Shweder, 2000). This feature of culture highlights the importance of detailed micro-level research in understanding the relation between culture and food security.

Finally, a major challenge in conceptualizing culture is identifying its boundaries. For this review, two boundary areas are of importance: between culture and institutions, and between culture and religion. Religion has proven even more difficult to define than culture, and their relation remains a topic of debate. Some scholars see religion as part of culture (e.g. Geertz, 1993; Richerson and Christiansen, 2013), while others argue that there are clear conceptual differences (e.g. Bonney, 2004). Since (a) it is difficult to distinguish between the two in much of the research relevant for this review, and (b) the traits typically associated with religion, such as an explanation of the origin and order of existence and moral codes (Bowie, 2003; Dow, 2007; Iannaccone, 1998), fit well with our understanding of culture, we follow the first approach and treat religion as part of culture. Regarding culture and institutions, we follow Alesina and Giuliano (2015) and consider only informal institutions (e.g. social norms) as part of culture.

### 2.2. Food security

Like culture, food security is a multi-dimensional and flexible concept that has been defined in various ways. We use one of the most widely accepted definitions, adopted by FAO in 1996 and refined in 2001; "*Food security is a situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life*" (FAO, 2002). The four accompanying '*pillars*' of food security were defined as *availability*, *access*, *utilization* and *stability* (FAO, 2009).

*Food availability* focuses on the supply side and refers to the extent to which sources of nutrition are physically available through (local) food production and sales. *Food access* in turn points to the household's or individual's ability to obtain the food that is available. We pay particular attention to *food choice* within the discussion of food access because the ability to obtain food does not necessarily translate into actual acquisition (Pinstrup-Andersen, 2009). For the purpose of this review, *food utilization* concerns the preparation, processing and cooking of foods. Finally, *stability* is the temporal dimension of food security and includes both the likelihood of experiencing shocks and the ability to recover from them.

It is important to acknowledge that conceptualized in this way, individual food security is a necessary but not sufficient condition for adequate nutrition. As outlined in the UNICEF malnutrition framework (Black et al., 2008), nutrition status is the result of the interplay between food and nutrient intake and health. However, as the effects of culture on health have been discussed elsewhere (e.g. Helman, 2007; Koenig et al., 2012; Spector, 2002), we limit the scope of our review to the impact of culture on the determinants of dietary intake only.

In our review, we focus on direct drivers, leaving aside indirect

[2] By restricting our attention to the household and individual level, we leave aside macro-level effects such as the impact of aggregate food preferences on food trade patterns.

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