

Nutritional habits of Chilean university students in the context of alimentary modernity

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I. Introduction

Common sense suggests that good nutrition leads to good health. In Chile, currently, food represents a problem linked to the fact that despite having overcome malnutrition due to shortage, a new aspect of malnutrition is advancing amongst the population, caused by an unbalanced diet, with high intakes of sugar and fat that has led to high rates of obesity and chronic diseases. In order to face this situation many programs, campaigns and movements have been created, but these have not been able to stop the incidence of obesity, as the rates have risen in individuals over 15 years old in Chile, from 61% to 67% between 2003 and 2010 (MINSAL, 2003, 2010).

These transformations may be contextualized in what has been called the alimentary and epidemiologic transition, or in what Kain et al. (2005) have referred to as alimentary and epidemiologic post transition. This is a transformation in people's habits due to an income increase, to changes in the prices of different foods, to a greater prominence of food technology and to new strategies of distribution. It is a process that changes human beings as well as the sociocultural and ecologic environments within which they interact (Gil-Romo et al. 2007; Gracia-Arnaiz, 2007).

There is a bulk of research in Chile and Latin America that addresses the alimentary transition as a catastrophe. They refer to the decrease of physical activity and to the different ways to approach this 'problem', as well as to the interventions that stem from Chilean public policy (Salinas & Vio, 2003); to the low intake of fruits and vegetables within Chilean population and the need to carry out education campaigns to change this trend (Villalobos et al. 2006); to the low intake of fish and the high of obesity prevalence amongst Chilean school children (Olivares et al. 2005); to the high prevalence of obesity and the lack of physical activity prevalence amongst Chilean school children (Kain et al. 2005); to the need to create public policies to regulate the intake of sweets and unhealthy food among children (Jackson et al. 2004); to the important deficiencies of the basic food basket and the alimentary pyramid defined for the country, compared to European standards (Díaz et al. 2006).

As Fischler (1995b) states for the contemporary diner, the rigid protocols of how, when, what and where to eat, have become more flexible. There is also a loss of a common

shared grammar through which individuals could be classified according to how they selected, prepared and ate their food. Individuals must then face the so called gastronomy and the multiple sources of information, culinary discourses, guides of nutrition, recipe books and healthy diets that are available to be used and incorporated to the world view that people rely on to decide on alimentary issues (Fischler, 1995a).

In this scenario the contemporary diner, ultimately omnivorous, has configured a 'wanderer's way' of approaching food (Fischler, 1995b) facilitated by eating alone, by the great amount of options and by having most meals out of home. The choices of the contemporary omnivore depend on a series of frameworks of meaning¹ that are crucial to understand the relation that they establish between food and the well-being it provides.

The purpose of this article is then to highlight the frameworks of meaning that guide the assessments, evaluations and perceptions of young undergraduate students about their own diets and food in general².

II. Methodology

The results presented in this article are taken from a case study carried out between 2008 and 2010 on a campus of Universidad de Chile in Santiago.

In this context, six focus groups and six in-depth interviews with undergraduates from all the different faculties and programmes in the campus were carried out, and complemented with a process of observation. One focus group was applied in each faculty and for the interviews factors such as sex, faculty, regime type and kind of accommodation, were considered thereby constructing a structural sample (Canales, 2006).

The tables below show how the samples for each method were constructed.

Table N° 1. Samples for Focus Groups, one for each of the six faculties and/or programmes and/or institutes that are located in Juan Gómez Millas Campus of Universidad de Chile.

| Campus, faculty or program | Focus group |
|----------------------------|-------------|
| Social Science | X |
| Philosophy and Humanities | X |

¹ These are understood as key concepts that guide people's perceptions on food and diet.

² This article analyzes part of the results of a wider research project on alimentary well-being among university students in Chile.

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| College | X |
| Communication and Image | X |
| Arts | X |
| Science | X |

Table N° 2. Sample of in-depth interviews

| Interviewee | Sex | Career/Programme, Institute or faculty | Socioeconomic level | Type of diet | Kind of Accommodation |
|--------------------|--------|---|---------------------|--|---------------------------|
| Carla ³ | Female | Film direction/Communication and image | Medium-high | Omnivore | Alone |
| Daniel | Male | Molecular Biotechnology and engineering /Sciences | Medium-high | Hypocaloric diet | With parents and siblings |
| José | Male | Psychology/Social Sciences | Medium-high | Vegetarian (including egg and milk products) | With parents and siblings |
| Ana | Female | Hispanic Literature/Philosophy and | Medium-high | Omnivore | With mother |

³The names of the interviewees has been changed in order to maintain their anonymity

| | | | | | |
|---------|--------|-----------------|-------------|------------|-------------------|
| | | Humanities | | | |
| Aillen | Female | College | Medium-high | Vegetarian | With grandparents |
| Antonio | Male | Visual Arts/Art | Medium-high | Omnivore | With friends |

A qualitative content analysis was carried out using the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti 5.0. The process of analysis was carried out in two stages. In the first stage the focus groups were analyzed and these results constituted a guide for the interviews. The second stage of analysis was carried out after the in-depth interviews and it comprehended material from both instruments, which was analyzed reconsidering some of the issues raised in the first hermeneutic unit but including the new emerging codes.

III. Frameworks of Meaning

Central concepts or frameworks of meaning have been identified from which to view the students' perceptions on food. These concepts are the ideal diet, pleasure, healthy food and the toxic.

III.a. The Ideal Diet

The concept of an ideal diet appears within most of the collected discourses. The ideal diet is present within the discourse as a utopic horizon on how to eat well, towards which everyone aspires as a role model, and to which they try to adjust their diet with more or less success.

When the research participants were asked directly what would be for them an ideal diet, the answer tended to stay within a few topics: variety, orderliness, balance, stable timing, a moment of relaxation, moderation in relation to the amounts of food, the concept of healthy and the idea of taking time to prepare and eat food, that is to say, the relevance of homemade food. In this item there were no differences that could be associated with gender, accommodation or diet.

The ideal diet in respect to orderliness and stable timing includes a necessary breakfast, lunch as the most important meal of the day and the concept that it is not good to eat between meals but that neither is it to let too much time pass between one meal and the other.

Variety, balance and moderation are linked to the food ideology that stems from the biomedical discourse on nutrition, according to which we should eat food from all the alimentary groups, balancing them as prescribed by the well-known food pyramid (Gracia-Arnaiz, 2007).

The ideal diet may be represented through two images that were frequently used to illustrate it in the discourse of the research participants.

The first of these images is homemade food. In most cases this reached back to the times of secondary school, before admission to higher education and it was closely linked to motherly care (far more than to care given by the father or other members of the family such as grandmother, aunt or older sibling). Homemade food is conceived as unarguably healthy, which from the idea of principle of incorporation, refers to the familiarity it represents (Fischler, 1995b), and to the related lower anxiety that it may produce. The idea of homemade food is directly linked to that of typical Chilean food. We will call this alimentary ideal, 'traditional ideal diet'.

"The lunch they give here is definitely the best. It's like the healthiest, because it is a homemade meal." (Focus Communication and Image)

The second image that was found in relation to the ideal diet is the concept of healthy, understood as that which is light, not only in calories but also in relation to the amount of food intake. Participants considered that the amounts of food should be controlled, associated with an image of light meals rationed into small portions, in order to have a healthy diet. This means that meals should be taken in an orderly way and not in excess. The ideal diet would then be low in calories and in quantity, structured and it should enable to cultivate the ideal light, slender and beautiful body that in itself implies a certain sacrifice. We will name this utopic horizon 'ascetic ideal diet'.

"Healthy is like balanced but not too heavy... yes, like you imagine Japanese food to be, sushi, or like chicken with lettuce, it's like the general idea, I mean, for me spaghetti with sauce is not healthy." (Carla)

These two images were observed to be associated and in many occasions to be used indistinctively, but in other cases they were linked to specific situations.

In the interviews it could be clearly seen that those who linked their evaluations of their own diet to the 'traditional diet ideal', were the young students who no longer lived with their parents or who had no one at home to take care of their diet (because both parents worked, because they lived with one parent who worked or because they lived with an elderly person who could not take care of them). On the other hand, the 'ascetic ideal

diet' was present throughout all the cases, and it appeared with more or less strength depending on the context of each student.

Even though there is clarity in what they understand as an ideal diet, the concept does not usually play an important role when it comes to selecting food for each meal. This generates feelings of guilt and tension in relation to their actual diets.

"When I am stressed I tend to eat more, and to be more of a 'pig'. I eat things that are not good for you. For example, a hot dog or a hamburger." (Focus Faculty of Philosophy and Social Sciences)

III.b. Orderliness / Structure

The kind of food consumed by the students is closely linked to its distribution through the different times of the day. This aspect also generates dissatisfaction in the students' evaluation of their own eating habits.

According to them, the university lifestyle is associated to constant changes in activities and it generates eating disorders such as is described in the following example: morning inappetence due to late nights of study eating different types of food, followed by moments of great hunger when they tend to pick foods to fill their stomachs – such as food that is high in fats, chocolates, bread-, followed perhaps by a prolonged period of no food intake until returning home and eating large amounts of foods.

"I am so used to university lifestyle that when I get up in the morning, I am not hungry at all, not even for half a piece of bread, like... I don't feel like eating anything, and when I get home at night I attack the fridge and take everything in it... so it's difficult, it's just because at night I have more time." (Focus Faculty of Arts)

The frequency of such disarrays increases during periods of examination or of higher academic work load, as they consider that stress is one of the main reasons for eating kinds of food that are not considered healthy and at times that are not considered convenient.

"When I am stressed and have to study more, I eat chocolate. It is a bad habit but it's like, there is like a biological need for chocolate." (Focus Faculty of Philosophy and Humanities)

This kind of behavior was reported by several students as a source of discomfort. Some chose to generate improvement strategies throughout the week and others, to make up for the disarrays during the weekends eating homemade food.

"I think about the day and it's like the horrible stuff I have been eating and I don't even feel I have more energy in spite of all the sugar I have eaten and it's like disgusting! Horrible! And when the weekend comes you just want to eat homemade food, with your mother, to be like very healthy." (Focus Faculty of Social Science)

It is possible to observe that an orderly structure of meals plays a very relevant role and that disarrays generate feelings of discomfort.

Admission to higher education is identified as the change that marks the start of their dissatisfaction with the way they eat. This dissatisfaction is often expressed in terms of a comparison with the eating habits that they had during secondary school, as may be observed in the following quote.

"Comparing with how I ate last year, I looked after my body because I did some exercise, I ate well, I was more careful with all that. But not anymore, now I eat very badly, in fact I think that the fact that you live, besides feeling unwell in university... that you live alone, forget it, all your meals of the day are not good." (Focus Faculty of Arts)

Those who live alone are usually students that have migrated from other parts of the country, which means that they have lived through major changes in their daily lives. They consider that when living alone their meals are very precarious, this is mainly because the preparation and purchase of food would take up the time of activities that are considered to be more relevant. They must also distribute their allowance or salary between transport, photocopies, books, food, rent and basic services, as is expressed below:

"If I stop paying the bills or the rent, the owner starts to phone me and cuts some of the services, if I stop reading I get bad marks, but if I stop eating, no one bothers me about it – if I stop eating well – I still eat. Although my mum may call me once a week and ask me if I have been eating well." (Focus Faculty of Social Sciences)

When on top of this, students have more serious socioeconomic problems unrest in relation to their diet becomes more patent. In this kind of situations the alimentary scholarships that are provided to the students with socioeconomic problems, are considered of great help⁴.

Those who live with relatives and have a better socioeconomic situation are still unhappy about their diet, which they blame on the wider access to the intake of sweets and salty

⁴ At the time this research was carried out, the food grants were very few, this was reflected in the fact that only one of the interviewees had this sort of support. Currently the number of grants has increased considerably.

snacks between meal times, on the flexibility of course schedules, amongst other situations. In other cases this dissatisfaction is attributed to the fact that meals stop being considered as a moment of leisure and become more functional. However, it seems that for this group it is easier to keep an order, because they have access to fresher foods such as fruit and vegetables as they are available at their homes the same as cooked meals which they may take to university or eat when they return home. Also, these are students who do not need to prioritize as radically as the options are less: books, transport, food, outings.

“Really the meal rhythm that I have here is just for like... just for the body to go on working more than sitting down and enjoying them. This is why I am not happy with my diet because I don’t enjoy eating as much as before.” (Aillen)

III.c. Healthy Food

When the research participants mention the concept of healthy in relation to food, in general they refer to what is considered healthy within mass media, which is in turn guided mainly by medical-nutritional criteria.

The food considered healthy seems very similar to what has already been described as the ideal diet. Healthy in relation to food is linked to the quality of the products and to the way in which these are combined, and how and in what amount these are eaten, in what order and times, all that has already been described in the paragraphs on the ideal diet.

Here we will refer to what is understood as quality products, the assessment according to which they are classified as healthy or unhealthy.

For this distinction it seems clear that what is healthy is what is light, low in calories and that helps to keep a slender body. This confirms that the medical-nutritional ideology described by Gracia-Arnaiz (2007) has achieved great prominence amongst higher education students. In this way, all the kinds of food considered as healthy can be classified within this category.

The kinds of food considered as healthy are mainly fruits and vegetables. However these must be taken in combination with other products such as meat in the case of those who have an omnivore diet and dried fruits, legumes, egg and milk, if possible, in the case of the vegetarians⁵. The latter state that not eating animal products is healthy.

⁵ There are many different kinds of vegetarians that follow diets that are more or less restrictive in relation to the intake of animal derived foods.

“...because as a vegetarian who does not eat meat, you have to worry about having a balanced diet. So they are obviously taking care to eat more beans and in that way you balance your diet, and it’s like unconscious.” (Aillen)

“Combining food that’s low in calories with protein, meat with vegetables. Like they taught you at school, to combine from the different food groups. The triangle.” (Focus Faculty of Philosophy and Humanities)

Legumes are considered healthy, although they are not often mentioned. In respect to meat, there seems to be a certain preference for white meat, however fish was scarcely mentioned.

Not any way of cooking is perceived as good, as fried food is considered unhealthy. In this way, in the case of vegetables, salad is considered as the healthiest preparation. Fats, sugar and salt are conceived as unhealthy, and the products that have these elements in excess will also be considered unhealthy. This includes sweets, soft drinks, and industrialized cereals. Light products created as substitute for the former, are also viewed as unhealthy as students did not trust artificial sweeteners or other substitutes.

“... like all the unhealthy food, with many calories, sweets, with too much sugar and fat.” (Focus Faculty of Social Sciences)

“In relation to soft drinks, I don’t drink light products, because I think that they are more harmful than the others. There is a lot of debate regarding light products.” (Focus Faculty of Social Sciences)

Both milk and yogurt are regarded as healthy, oats are another product considered healthy. There are other types of food such as flour and meat, that are considered healthy only when they are consumed in moderation.

What is perceived as healthy is food that closely resembles low-calorie diets. This reinforces the idea that a diet can be considered as healthy only when it helps to keep or to gain a slender body.

The whole range of foods that comprehends sweets, sandwiches, hot dogs, hamburgers, pastries, soft drinks and coffee, is viewed as unhealthy and these products are referred to as dirty food, junk, trash.

“Unhealthy is bread, sweets, chocolates (...) It is everything that is made of pastry, that is plastic.” (Focus Faculty of Arts)

“To eat like a pig is tasty: bread with egg! (...) something dirty like chocolate.” (Focus Faculty of Arts)

These ways of referring to food were mostly used by women, this shows that they refer to a discourse of beauty (Franch, 2008), that is embedded in gender prescriptions for women, where white, that is, clean, hygienic, ethnically desirable, and thin as opposed to fat or obese, are important values.

Notwithstanding the clear distinction that the students trace between the healthy and the unhealthy, and despite the fact that their ideal diet should include healthy foods, they confess that the food that they eat during class hours is mainly composed by products that they consider unhealthy.

III.d. Pleasure

Currently, although the social and cultural markers of satiation have become weaker (Douglas, 1995; Rozin, 1995) due to the patterns of eating alone and individually regulating food choices, it is still possible to suggest that the physical ideal of thinness which was described earlier functions as a marker of satiation. The concept that people build an ideal diet on the basis of the desired consequences it is expected to have on their bodies, has already been stated.

In this context it is relevant to consider the idea of pleasure. Common sense suggests eating as something pleasurable and enjoyable. However, it is not only common sense, the media and marketing tend to highlight the pleasure that is associated to the products they promote, emphasizing with increasing insistence the health qualities of the products, linking the ideal of thinness with the pleasure the products provide.

In this piece of research, however, the perspectives on food are not always linked to pleasure. In the first place, food is experienced as a secondary priority that may be put aside in favor of other issues. This explains why, in many occasions, students prefer not to eat in order to save money for other needs or to save time and spend it on something they consider more relevant. When asked about eating, on many occasions they answer that it has a functional role, meaning that it allows them to stay active in their day to day, viewing it as something mechanic and not particularly interesting.

Despite this apparent lack of attention, when they deepen into their ideas it is possible to detect issues related to food that are of great relevance. It is at this point that it is possible to observe food as a source of unrest or displeasure with a very central role within people's lives.

The pleasure of eating is linked to various situations. Some of them are to enjoy a moment with the family, friends or partner, and to eat something considered tasty. However, these pleasant situations may easily turn into disagreeable ones, for example, when they eat more than they feel they should or when they lose control or when the food on the plate is considered unhealthy and bringing unwanted physical consequences such as getting fat.

Although the idea of eating with pleasure is present and highly valued, when people go over certain limits and lose control, eating only for pleasure starts to be conceived as problematic. At this point the imperative to eat light operates as well as the idea of control, which may be linked to a class ideology. Although the participants in this piece of research do not all come from the local high class, as some of them may be classified into the middle groups, their alimentary and physical body likes, dislikes and ideals refer to the ideals of the high class or to what Montecino (2006) has called the ethic of sobriety and slenderness.

In this way, it is possible to identify two different kinds of pleasure related to eating: one is linked to the intake of tasty food products, that have an attractive flavor, but that are made out of sugar, fat, and as some of the interviewees said, are 'piggish', and in the eyes of these young girls may have negative consequences in the perception of their own bodies; the other is the pleasure in eating healthy light food in an orderly manner, bringing peace of mind and positive consequences for the body.

If we look at this from Fischler's (1995a) principle of incorporation, each type of food eaten will be turned into its effects on the imaginary of the body, imprinting its characteristics upon it. In this way a diet that is plenty on sugar and fats, considered heavy and a light diet composed by a large intake of fruit and vegetables, will translate into heaviness and fatness and lightness and beauty, respectively.

"In relation to food, there are two kinds of pleasure, I mean that are related to food... I mean you can feel very good because you have a healthy diet, not because you like healthy foods, but just because you like the way it makes you feel, it makes you feel like a model, like your life is changing, because I am eating well, I am doing sports, there is something psychological in all that... I don't know how else I could describe it (...) it is like a pleasure that is oriented towards an end, on the long run, like I am eating healthy and afterwards I will be thin and each time you imagine the more beautiful that you are going to be, you know? On the other hand if you are eating tasty food, you eat everything and you feel an immediate pleasure, like amazing, but afterwards you don't feel too well about yourself, you feel like fat, like blown up and you can't move, but when you are biting into that melted pizza full of fat, it's lovely." (Carla)

It is therefore possible to suggest that there is a kind of guilty pleasure that comes with a loss of control, where the ethic of sobriety and slenderness is left momentarily on the side and operates as a negative reference. And that there is another pleasure, linked to alimentary restrictions where this ethic operates as a positive guiding reference, where lightness is experienced pleasantly.

Although this sort of discourse can be detected within men as well as women, it is in this last group where it is a stronger and more elaborate discourse, while men speak of eating large quantities and unhealthy food in medical-nutritional terms but without the constant use of the principle of incorporation in relation to their bodies.

III.e. Toxic Food

These two sorts of pleasure can be set in motion through a model that includes what is perceived as toxic and nontoxic.

Basically, we suggest that there is a continuum between the poles of intoxication and detoxification. Intoxication is associated to tiredness and pleasure. It is a behavior with a short term logic that is strongly linked to the intake of fast or unhealthy food. To consume toxic foods and to behave toxically makes them feel toxic or be, as they say, in a toxic state. To be toxic, is the consequence of a series of situations such as the lack of sleep, a diet based on bread, hot dogs, empanadas (pastry), sweets and alcohol.

In opposition to the toxic state is the need of detoxification. Detoxification takes hard work and a long-term logic. It is crucial to have what would be considered as a healthy diet, and it includes the physical ideal and the concept of well-being. Detoxification requires eating and sleeping well.

Intoxication and detoxification are perceived as alternative stages of a continuum. The episodes of intoxication are generally corrected through episodes and procedures of intensive detoxification, with a modification of the behaviors that caused the previous state.

Detoxification is usually attributed to a 'request from the body' that would feel harmed as a result from the previous disarrays.

"I like... well, on weekends I eat well, some weeks well as well, others quite bad, they are moments like of intoxication, detoxification. And to say there are weeks that ok! I eat whatever! And on other weeks I worry, at the end I don't know if I am ever going to eat according to some plan, to always eat what I should be eating. But I am always trying that not to eat so much." (Focus Faculty of Arts)

“You feel weird, in general, of course my weight doesn’t change, like before that I ate every day at my house. Now at university everything is hectic, the weight doesn’t change but you do feel that sometimes like toxic, that is, your body is unwell, because you have slept too little, you have eaten out of meal times, you have eaten too much all at once, so the body resents that.” (Focus Faculty of Sciences)

What was previously described as an unhealthy diet –time disarrays, fats, sugar and high-calorie foods- is potentially intoxicating. On the other hand the ideal or healthy diet would have detoxification potential –cooking foods with time and dedication, to eat different products, combining from different food groups, to include fruits and vegetables and to eat in an orderly way-.

It may be suggested that the orderly use of the body would allow detoxification to take place. At this point it is possible to see how the different frameworks of meaning operate in relation to food: the routinization of meals would help to build feelings tranquility and security; eating light, healthy, homemade food would allow to make the body fitter and would allow you to adjust to the ideal models of body and diet. Disarrays, heavy food, eating away from home, high amounts of fat and sugar would make an undesirable body far from the ideal standards.

The frameworks of meaning, would then be operating as guidelines in the evaluation of their own diet and in the decisions taken in relation to it. The different concepts described here would be working as organizers of the alimentary experience, according to which individuals may classify their practices in one way or another resulting in various combinations.

IV. Conclusions

The perceptions on food and diet are arranged according to the frameworks of meaning that we have described through some of their key concepts: the ideal diet, healthy food, pleasure and toxicness.

From the results presented here, it is possible to state that food does not constitute a source of well-being for university students, as it generates a series of discomforts and tensions. All the students but specially the women who participated in this piece of research, have a particularly complex relation with their body and their diet, issues that generate pleasure and guilt, as has been suggested by Hamblin (1995).

As Rivera has stated (2006) young people report having a diet that is poor in fruits, vegetables and fiber. However unlike what she suggests, this is not due to a lack of information, because their discourses are in line with what is nutritionally adequate, but

due to the contexts in which they eat and the foods available, in relation to which the frameworks of meaning would guide their decisions regarding their food.

Although unrest regarding food is quite generalized, the discomfort is deeper among:

- Women. They feel more displeased with their diet because of the difficulty to adapt it to the ideals and, in this way, to cultivate a desirable body. This is in line with what Lameira et al. (2003) have stated about the higher dissatisfaction that female students feel in relation to male students, and some of the results presented by Franch (2008).
- People of lower socioeconomic level. They have fewer possibilities of access to the kinds of food considered as ideal and are therefore unable to adopt certain practices. This is similar to what was shown by Borges et al. (2007), for young people in the city of Sao Paulo.
- Students who live alone. The uncertainty they feel upon admission to university is difficult to deal with, as they are living through big changes in their daily lives and must generate new practices in many aspects of their lives. This was suggested by Navarro et al. (2006), when they stated that admission to university has a negative effect on the students' diet, especially for those who leave their family homes.

The sources of discomfort associated to food, are linked to the difficulties that going to university generates, which would prevent students from having a diet that is closer to their concepts of an ideal. The connection between food and body is crucial to understand the relationship between food and well-being. A great part of the unrest, especially amongst women, comes from the tension caused by the pressure to cultivate a bodily image that fits their expectations. The relation between food and well-being amongst students is particularly tense. This phenomenon has different characteristics according to gender, socioeconomic level and kind of accommodation and the dissatisfaction is more intense among women, students who live away from home and those who have less money available for their personal expenses.

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