George Washington University
Institute for Ethnographic Research

Food Rules in the United States: Individualism, Control, and Hierarchy
Author(s): Carole M. Counihan
Source: *Anthropological Quarterly*, Vol. 65, No. 2 (Apr., 1992), pp. 55-66
Published by: The George Washington University Institute for Ethnographic Research
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/3318134
Accessed: 07/12/2009 18:59

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=ifer.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

The George Washington University Institute for Ethnographic Research is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Anthropological Quarterly.*

http://www.jstor.org

FOOD RULES IN THE UNITED STATES: INDIVIDUALISM, CONTROL, AND HIERARCHY

CAROLE M. COUNIHAN
Millersville University

College students in the United States reveal adherence to central cultural values through their ideas about food and eating. In their food journals they manifest concern with individual free choice in diet and self-control towards food so as to be thin, moral, and admirable. By adhering to an ideology that values thinness and self-control and that permits well-off people to decide what poor people should eat and men to determine what women should eat, students uphold the stratification of U.S. society which elevates men, whites, and the rich over women, people of color, and the poor. Awareness of cultural values embedded in food rules is an important step towards challenging the unscrutinized value system that supports social hierarchy. [food rules, United States, gender, hierarchy, college students]

"For I have known them all already,
known them all,
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
I have measured out my life in coffee spoons"

T.S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1961: 13).

Introduction

Rules about food consumption are an important means through which human beings construct reality.[1] They are are an allegory of social concerns, a way in which people give order to the physical, social, and symbolic world around them (see Manderson 1986b). This article uses data from college students' food journals to examine rules about what and how to eat in U.S. culture. It argues that students' food rules convey a belief in self-control and individual choice and that they uphold hierarchical social relations.

College students' ideas about food are embedded in the value system of U.S. society. Unlike non-capitalist societies where food exchanges reduce social distance and solidify relationships (Mauss 1967; Sahlins 1972: 215-219), in our capitalist society, food is a commodity, an object whose exchange creates distance and differentiation. Through capitalist exchange, what Sahlins (1972) calls negative reciprocity, individuals are separated from and placed in antagonistic positions towards each other. Some have control over access to food; others do not. Hence food becomes a vehicle of power, "power in a most basic, tangible, and inescapable form" (Arnold 1988: 3; see also Counihan 1988).

For students, the ability to determine their own and others' food consumption manifests their place in the social hierarchy and their ability to be autonomous and independent. For male and female students alike, self-control is the ability to deny appetite, suffer hunger, and deny themselves foods they like but believe fattening. Individual choice involves determining for themselves what foods are acceptable and consuming or abstaining from them when they wish. Together, these two values are part of the Euro-American cultural ideal. My informants share the perspective of Sidel's "New American Dreamers" who hold

> that they can and must make their own way in life, . . . can and must take control of their lives. . . . They believe success is there for the taking; all they need to do is figure out the right pathway and work hard. Above all, they believe that they must be prepared to go it alone (1990: 9).

These beliefs that success comes from individual hard work to take control of one's life are manifest in college students' food rules, as I shall demonstrate below. The food rules embody the beliefs almost unconsciously and hide from young men and women the realities of class, race, and gender stratification that they uphold, reinforcing students' tendency to assume worth belongs to those with privilege, rather than seeing that privilege defines worth.

Because food has an unusually rich symbolic malleability (Barthes 1975: 57), it is a particularly apt medium for displaying widely varying cultural ideologies. In different cultures, people endow food

with meaning on the basis of its primary qualities such as color, taste, texture, or smell; according to its method of preparation or presentation; or by the manner and order in which it is served. It may also take on the attributes of those who contributed to its preparation or production. In addition, food has meaning according to what it does to the body in terms of weight gain or loss, or feelings of strength or weakness. Anthropologists have studied food rules and taboos to explain cultural constructions of gender, class, nature, religion, morality, health, and the social order.[2]

Awareness of how eating is defined and evaluated in the U.S. is important. First, it enables us more accurately to study the meaning of food in other cultures with acknowledgment of the blinders provided by our own food rules. Second, the success of nutrition education programs depends on their ability to fit into cultural patterns. Finally, food rules are part of a usually unscrutinized cultural ideology which continuously leads to the reinforcement of life as it is. Because eating is such a basic condition of existence, people take their foodways for granted and rarely subject them to conscious examination. To use the words of Antonio Gramsci (1955: 3-4), food rules consist of a "language" which contains "a determined conception of the world." Yet because they reflect and recreate the gender, race, and class hierarchies so prevalent in American society, deconstructing food rules is part of the process of dismantling the hierarchies that limit the potential and life chances of subordinate groups.

Research on Food Rules in College Culture

Method and study population

My data come principally from food-centered journals kept by male and female students in my "Food and Culture" class over several years.[3] Keeping journals is a requirement for the class; students write twice a week on topics provided by me or of their own interest. Of particular relevance in this paper are their writings on: "good" foods and "bad" foods, food and gender, food and power or control, the meaning of "fat" and "thin," food and family, food and the holidays, fasting, and binging. Data come from approximately 250 students at Stockton State College in southern New Jersey and at Millersville University in south central Pennsylvania. Students are predominantly working and lower middle-class white Euro-Americans. A significant minority are first generation college students. The majority come from two-parent families, though divorce of parents is not uncommon. Often students' mothers worked only at home during their childhood but were employed outside the home before and after this period. In most cases their mothers were the primary food preparers.

In this article I do not focus on differences in the food rules of male and female students because, for the most part, they share a culture of food even as it differentially affects them and as it poses far more serious limitations on women than on men. In this respect, my findings conform closely to those of Holland and Eisenhart (1990) who, in their study of southern college students, found that male and female students held similar models of attractiveness based on different standards for men and women which "constrained women's lives more than men's" (1990: 94). Thus I will use quotations from both men and women to illustrate what I believe are food rules common to both and to a large segment of Euro-American society.[4]

Why study college students

Present and past college students form a large segment of United States society. While not fully representative of the population, the fact that today "roughly half of American youth between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one" (Horowitz 1987: xi) attend college means that college students are worthy of study. They are particularly interesting for the purposes of this article because they are in a sort of long-term "liminal" (Turner 1969) state, betwixt and between youth and adulthood, autonomous but not fully responsible for all their needs (which are provided by dormitories and food services), and both enacting and challenging central cultural values.

As Holland and Eisenhart (1990) have convincingly demonstrated in their study of college students at one historically black and one historically white state university in the South, the peer culture is the most important source of values, arbiter of behavior, and focus of interest (see also Horowitz 1987; Moffatt 1989). It is also a particularly "virulent purveyor . . . of gender privilege" (Holland and Eisenhart 1990: 8). For most college students the "culture of romance" has an overriding importance. Within this culture

> [m]en's prestige and correlated attractiveness come from the attention they receive from women and from success at sports, in school politics, and in other arenas. Women's prestige and correlated attractiveness come only from the attention they get from men (p. 104).

As a result, ties to men are the most important social ties for women, stronger than and determinant of those to women. Academics are secondary to peer relations for most women. Participation in the culture of romance prepares women for and reinforces their subordinate social position for it links their self-worth to men's attention rather than to their success in school.

Holland and Eisenhart (1990) define attractiveness only in relative terms as a woman's ability to command good treatment from desirable men. It is clear, however, from my data on college students that a crucial absolute determinant of attractiveness in the peer culture is thinness. As will become clear below, female students' desire to be thin so as to be attractive reinforces their secondary position in the gender hierarchy while supporting their claims to higher status. Hence, my findings confirm and extend those of Holland and Eisenhart by providing data on food rules and meanings, areas not covered in their study.

At the same time as my data reveal a great deal about the college peer culture, they also provide information about United States culture in general. For students' ideas about eating reflect the standards and values learned through their family, friends, teachers, and mass media while growing up. To be sure, the student life imposes some special characteristics on eating behavior and attitudes. For example, the fact that most of my student informants live in dormitories or their own apartments rather than with their parents affects the meaning of "family" food which, through its absence, takes on greater symbolic import than when eaten every day. Students on meal plans must eat at specified times or miss meals; this sometimes forces them to eat when not hungry and to resort to junk or fast food when they are hungry outside of institutional meal times. They are likely either to eat alone in their rooms, or to eat publicly in front of scores of peers in the collective dining commons, at parties, or on late-night pizza runs. The extent to which they eat in public and with people they know and want to impress probably exacerbates their concerns over eating properly and calls the food rules into more salient relief than might otherwise be the case. However, in spite of the peculiarities of living in a world populated almost exclusively by age-mates, I believe that the food rules espoused by students are highly revealing of central values and concerns in Euro-American United States society.

Food Rules in U.S. College Culture

The most important aspects of food in the meaning system of American college students are its vaguely understood nutritional qualities, particularly its caloric value; its power to tempt appetite; its ability to make one fat; and its emotional associations. Although students did articulate specific symbolic meanings for a few foods—for example pork and sauerkraut eaten on New Year's Day bring luck to Pennsylvania Germans, and turkey epitomizes Thanksgiving—their overall interest in food was not in its intrinsic properties, but in their relationship to it and through it to their bodies and to a standard of beauty based on extreme thinness.

Nutrition: Good and bad eating

One salient intrinsic characteristic of food in U.S. culture is its nutritional content; this fact represents the influence of the scientific mode of thinking on popular ideology. Rules for good food involve the notion of a "balanced" diet which is defined not in terms of "hot" and "cold" (Laderman 1983; Manderson 1986c), male and female (Meigs 1984), sweet and savoury (Douglas 1974), or raw and cooked foods (Lévi-Strauss 1966), but rather in terms of the basic four food groups, defined according to their complementary nutrients (see Science and Education Administration 1980).

The principal goal of the scientifically defined balanced diet is to insure adequate nutrients and calories according to individual needs while limiting damaging foods that are high in sugar, fat, cholesterol, and sodium. Students have a vague knowledge of scientific nutrition. Many learned at some point in their upbringing that everyone should eat something daily from the basic four food groups, although none was very explicit about specific recommendations. Many students condemn excess consumption of red meat, animal fat, cholesterol, sugar, junk food, and greasy food. They report as "good for you" vegetables, fruits, grains, low-fat dairy products, fish, poultry, roughage, and such anomalous foods as pancakes, corn, and lamb. In

spite of the enormous publicity over oat bran in the late 1980s, students rarely mentioned it. Not only does student understanding of nutritional precepts seem rather sketchy (see Sobal and Cassidy 1987), but so does their perceived adherence to them as shown in their food logs and reports on meals (see Stasch, Johnson, and Spangler 1970). Students tend to eat too few fresh fruits and vegetables; to consume too many soft drinks, sweets, greasy snacks, and alcoholic beverages; and in general to lack precisely the "balance" in their diets that even they recommend. Nevertheless, they do not seem terribly upset by their failure to eat nutritionally.

In fact, college students express their individualism and independence by defining their own good diet. Over and over again, they write in their journals statements such as the following: " 'Good' and 'bad' foods are simply what you make them to be" (F/F 1990),[5] that is, not what scientists say they are. Women in particular are more concerned about calories than about vitamins, minerals, fats, carbohydrates, and proteins:

> I always think of food in terms of calories. It's like I have a built-in calculator in my brain. Every time I eat something I automatically think about what I'm eating and how many calories I'm consuming. I don't seem to think in terms of nutrition, just calories (F/S86).

What my informants think most about is how much and in what manner they eat. They are most concerned not with the food itself but rather with their behavior towards it. Personal expression of willpower and release of control only under certain culturally sanctioned conditions are the key issues in their relationship to food and in their overall ideology of life. Students believe "good" eating involves consumption of three meals timed to fall at appropriate intervals in the morning, midday, and early evening and limited to amounts just sufficient to satisfy hunger. As one student said, "I try to eat a healthy diet three times a day; cut down on snacking; exercise; and I stop eating when I feel satisfied" (M/S90). "Bad" eating is that done solely for pleasure (except in exceptional circumstances), in excess, in between meals or late at night, without control, and beyond the point of minimally satisfying hunger. Snacking, binging, eating on the run, eating alone, and stuffing oneself are all "bad."

There are many reasons for students' failure to conform to the rules of scientific nutrition. First of all, their behavior reflects their belief in the American dream: that each person can and should carve his or her own path to success. Eating should be as individualized as other pursuits. Furthermore, empirical evidence contradicts science and undermines students' faith in its tenets. This was beautifully expressed by one male informant:

> Bad foods: people say too much red meat is a bad food. Well I guess that's scientifically been proven. But, for example, my grandfather, who is 84 years old, has eaten meat and potatoes every day for years and he's in good condition. Another example of bad foods is fast food, well if you know Hershel Walker, who is a great running back in the NFL. He eats one meal a day which contains four hamburgers from a fast food chain. And throughout the day he eats 8-10 candy bars. If you have ever seen this man you would realize he's in top condition with an excellent body with no fat (M/S90).

Not only does experience contradict the scientific canons, but they themselves are confusing, sometimes contradictory, and perceived as ineffective.[6]

> What might be good for someone to eat to keep their cholesterol level down may not be good for their high blood pressure. . . . Food that is supposed to lower your cholesterol may in fact raise your level. . . . Both of these problems have happened to both friends and family. The foods that my father is told to stay away from for his gout are the foods that he is "allowed" to eat to keep his cholesterol level down. . . . A friend was rigorously following the advice of his doctor and faithfully watched what he was eating to reduce his cholesterol level, but instead of lowering, his level increased. So, who is to say what foods are "good" or "bad" for me? Maybe someday someone will convince me that they found the list of "good" and "bad" foods but until then, I'll just go with what I've been eating (F/F90).

The confusion students perceive in the rules themselves contributes to the ease with which they break them.

Another reason why students do not eat according to the tenets of scientific nutrition is because they have what Laderman (1983: 3) calls "rules to break rules." These enable people to behave differently from ways professed as proper by the food rules, but to do so in culturally justifiable ways. U.S. college students have clear ideas about the circumstances under which it is all right to break their own food rules, and these are highly revealing about their attitudes toward self and eating. Rather than structuring their behavior primarily on the basis of what they know about nutrition, whether from science or from folklore, people eat according to complex meanings food has for them.

The Meaning of Eating for College Students

Food signifies pleasure and celebration. Because of these meanings, holidays are a justification for eating in ways that students define as bad. As one student said, holidays are an "excuse to overeat" (M/F90). Their ritual and social nature enables extraordinary behavior that is normally condemned and highlights a contradiction central to consumer capitalism: the tension between the pleasures of consumption and the moral superiority deriving from abstention. Whereas students who overeat alone in their rooms may feel immediately guilty, those who splurge at Thanksgiving or a party may not like their behavior, but will not feel as guilty: "I always stuff myself at restaurants or at parties. The temptations of the wonderful foods are too strong. . . . I do not become depressed or think constantly about what I had ate. I just know I'll eat less the next day" (F/S86).

Students also define food as fuel for the body: "What does food mean to me? It means energy and without food I'm like a car without gas" (M/S90). Because of this belief, being in a hurry or coping with a life that is too rushed to eat "right" is another excuse to eat badly by grabbing some junk food out of a vending machine or stopping for fast food. The more convenient accessibility of bad foods compared to good foods contributes to students breaking rules and being able to justify the transgression.

Because food means comfort and love for students, splurging on sweets or other special foods is sanctioned as a crutch for dealing with emotional distress: grief, depression, anger. Students know eating certain foods makes them feel better so they allow the emotionally therapeutic value of the food to override the possible nutritional drawbacks of eating too much or eating the wrong things. One female student wrote:

> Around adolescence, I guess that I was going through some kind of a crisis. Food became my only consolation. While other people started smoking or taking drugs, I became addicted to junk food. I came to the point where I used to buy brown sugar, and eat it raw. Food is a friend, a consolation, a hobby, a companion. Whenever I feel lonely, down or depressed, I go to the refrigerator (F/S86).

A very common explanation for students' food habits is their perceived contrast between foods that are "good for you" and bad tasting vs. good tasting and "bad for you." For example, one student said,

> What is good food? I'm assuming it's food that is healthy for your body. But what about bad food? Bad food is unhealthy food, and I've been known to like bad food for a long time. Why is the food bad if it tastes good? I know it clogs your arteries and your heart. But why does it taste so good? If junk food, as it is also called, would taste bad there would be no problem. I guess there is a reason why junk food tastes good! Aha I know why! Junk food is often a treat for us so we savor getting treats. If we don't always eat junk food or any food for that matter we become hungry for it (M/S90).

Students eat "badly" because they love so-called bad foods and they define these foods as "treats." Eating "badly" is consolation and reward.

Another reason why students transgress the rules of scientific nutrition in their eating behavior is because, as one student said, "there are no real consequences" (M/F90). Transgressors of food rules in other cultures may be subject to supernatural punishment (Mauss 1967: 53-59), illness (Laderman 1983), shame (Kahn 1986), or social ostracism (Young 1986), but in the U.S. in many respects there are indeed no perceived consequences for not eating according to the canons of scientific nutrition. Any detrimental health effects take years to manifest themselves. And young Americans have a pervasive sense of invulnerability, "a belief, shaped by individualism, that they have some sort of personal exemption from the consequences that we are warned of. . . . Being young, in itself, gives special license to break rules. . . . Youth brings immunity from penalty" (Fitchen 1990). However, Americans do suffer consequences for eating the wrong way, that is, for eating too much. Eating is a behavior which constructs the self. It must be done in a proper and controlled manner lest one project an undesirable, immoral, or gender inappropriate self.

Control

Eating sparingly is a measure of proper human behavior in the United States and in many other cultures (see, for example, Young 1986). For example, Wamirans of Papua New Guinea (Kahn 1986) fear greed and have deeply held social expectations that people be generous with food. Greed or stinginess are immoral because they would destroy the fabric of community so painstakingly constructed through sharing food and feasting communally (see Mauss 1967; Young 1986). For U.S. college students, controlling greed is also important, but not to promote food sharing and the ongoing construc-

tion of community as in Wamira. In the U.S. eating properly promotes individualism and personal power. "I use food to sometimes show some control in my life. . . . When other aspects in my life seem to leave my control, I can always rely on food to bring back some feelings of self-control" (F/F90). College students value the exercise of restraint in eating because it is a path to personal attractiveness, moral superiority, high status, and dominance:

> Thinness, to me, is a symbol of control. This control is both applied over other people and to one's own actions and needs. Despite the role of heredity in the determination of one's body type, over which there is no control, I nevertheless have more respect for and am more attracted to those who are thin. My own preference seems to be that of most other people as well. I believe that to become and remain thin, in a society of excess such as ours, takes a great deal of self-knowledge and control. It seems so easy to give in to the powers of the palate and eat our way to ecstasy while ignoring our self-image and the image we present to others. Thin people are controlled by these images and thus rarely give in to excessive eating. Thin people also have control over those who are not thin. When non-thin people look at those who are thin there is usually resentment at what they are not and at those who represent this. With this resentment comes a sort of "invisible" control exhibited by thin people since they are somehow more powerful and in control. Thinness is thus a cause and effect of control both over oneself and over others. This control arises from our own ideas about attractiveness and unattractiveness (M/S90).

Hierarchy

The white working and middle-class students who form the majority of my sample adhere to food rules that uphold a cultural reality based on stratification by class, race, and sex. Although some may individually challenge or subvert the rules on occasion, I found no evidence of a collective challenge of the rules or of the hierarchies they uphold. In fact, the only power which students more consistently subvert through their eating habits is, not surprisingly, that of their parents.

Psychologists (Bruch 1973; Freud 1946) and pediatric health care professionals (Satter 1987) have documented how food can become a battleground between parents and children. College students recognize the power parents can exercise through food: their control of what and how much is available, their efforts to make children eat what they do not want, their ability to reward with or withold food, and their use of food as emotional power. Some students evince very strong positive feelings about home-cooking and family meals which represent love and nurturance: "Another way I think of food is 'home' and 'love.' When my mom cooks something special, I know it's because she loves us and wants the best for our family" (F/S86). Others describe in dramatic detail horrible fights with their parents over how much and what they eat:

> It started again tonight—I don't know why I expected tonight to be any different. The dinner table becomes a battleground every night around 5 pm. I'm not home very often for dinner, but when I am it's brutal. My mother is the worst. Every night at dinner we hear about how hard she works and how rotten we kids are. . . . Then she starts complaining how tired she is when she comes home from work and how she 'puts herself out' to make dinner for us, how ungrateful we are because we don't eat it. How does she expect us to eat after she's been bitching at us through the whole meal? (F/S86).

Some students delight in the freedom at college to eat when and what they choose; others miss family food deeply. If Holland and Eisenhart (1990) are correct that a common feature of student peer cultures is opposition to authority, it is not surprising that many college students would desire to oppose parental authority and claim their growing independence through their eating habits (Counihan and Tarbert 1988). It seems clear, and the literature on eating disorders supports this assumption (Brumberg 1988; Bruch 1973, 1978; Chernin 1981; Counihan 1985; Lawrence 1984), that students who are most troubled in their efforts to achieve autonomy from their parents and control over their lives are those who may most dramatically oppose traditional family eating habits.

For students the moral behavior of constrained eating places them higher rather than lower on axes of power. As Stunkard (1977) has shown, class status varies directly with thinness for both men and women, though more strongly for women. The higher one's class, the thinner one is likely to be. By clinging to standards of thinness and control over eating, students are supporting a hierarchical social structure and their place higher up within it. They are concerned with not eating too much or not letting food consume them. They fear losing the moral authority that comes from self-control, and they fear the social condemnation that comes from being fat. Fat is not only supremely unattractive in our culture, but it is a clear symbol of loss of control. The thin body proclaims that its wearer eats right, is good, and fits society's ideals. Thin

people, as the student above stated so eloquently, have bodies which symbolize their control. And thus they have power over others, the power that comes with self-righteousness and moral rectitude.

Students not only support the class structure through adherence to the standard made famous by the Duchess of Windsor that "you can never be too rich or too thin," but also in their belief that "the poor should eat differently from other Americans because they are different. . ." (Fitchen 1988: 311). Students, particularly those who work as cashiers in food stores, often complain that people with food stamps buy junk or luxury foods, do not shop wisely, and do not stretch their limited resources. The USDA "thrifty food plan" which determines food stamp benefits is based on the expectation that the poor eat differently—less meat and high protein food, more breads, cereals, and beans (Emmons 1986, 1987). However, the poor try to eat like everyone else as a way of overcoming the feelings of deprivation and difference associated with poverty (Fitchen 1988). The claim of middle and upper-class people that it is legitimate for them to determine the diet of poor people, their ability to be choosy about food, and their superior diet, define them as both more powerful and as behaviorally and morally superior to the poor.

Adherence to properly constrained eating behaviors also reinforces ethnic and racial hierarchies in U.S. culture. Researchers have noted that there is "a strong ethnic component to patterns and degrees of overweight among given subgroups of Americans" (Beller 1977: 8) which is particularly salient among women. Afro-American women (Styles 1980), Puerto Ricans (Massara 1989; Massara and Stunkard 1979), and Native Americans (Garb, Garb, and Stunkard 1975) all have had and accepted higher obesity rates than whites, especially rich whites (Stunkard 1977). By trying to control eating and body size, students can differentiate themselves from lower status ethnic and racial minorities and—perhaps unwittingly—uphold U.S. racial hierarchy.

Similarly, men and women are defined as different and ranked hierarchically in many cultures including our own by rules about their food consumption (Meigs 1984). Adams (1990: 189) claims that in the U.S. the "message of male dominance is conveyed through meat eating—both in its symbolism and reality." While college students today[7] express vague notions that "lighter" foods such as salads and chicken are female, and "heavier" foods such as beef and potatoes are male, they much more consistently define male and female eating in terms of how much rather than what is consumed. The sexes are enjoined to eat differently—men to eat heartily and abundantly, women daintily and sparingly. "It seems that if a woman eats a lot in front of a man she takes on some kind of masculine quality" (F/F90). Contemporary Americans tenaciously maintain gender difference and hierarchy by eating differently and appropriately for their gender. One female student described a fellow student who represented "the typical male attitude towards food and eating. [He believed that] females should 'watch what they eat,' whereas males can eat whatever they want. Also, men seem to feel that they have power to delegate to women what they can and cannot eat" (F/F90).

Students enforce gender hierarchy by notions about who has the right to control whose food consumption. Just as the well-off claim the right to decide what the poor should eat (Fitchen 1988), men are often the arbiters of women's diets. Women repeatedly note that eating in the presence of members of the opposite sex is intimidating; on dates they eat sparsely lest they be judged "pigs." Several female students reported male friends decrying how much other women eat and others wrote about about how their boyfriends or fathers harassed them about being overweight and eating excessively, experiences also reported by Millman (1980: 165) and Bruch (1973, 1978) in their research on eating disorders. For example, one female student reported:

> Ever since 3rd grade my father and I would always argue bitterly about how much I weigh. He would always try to prevent me from eating certain things. It has always upset me that my own father could not accept me the way I was. I know he loves me but I wish he didn't feel like he had to make me change. . . . Even though he made an attempt to make dinner times comfortable, I still remembered how he felt about my weight and I tended to eat less in front of my father, then I would eat more in secrecy, late at night, at stores, at fast-food restaurants, or over at friends' houses. This resulted in me gaining more weight. I resented my father putting restrictions on what I ate. Therefore, I ate more behind his back (F/S86).

This student felt oppressed by her father's regimentation of her diet and dissatisfaction with her person; she rebelled by eating behind his back.

Men gain control of women not only by making them feel insecure about their weight and food consumption, but by having the "right" to be

judges of their weight. In fact, women are much more likely than men to be the targets of judgmental comments made by both women and men on all topics related to eating. The acceptance of this fact and its constant reproduction by women as well as men reinforces the subordinate position of women, the judged, relative to men, the judges. Given the importance of being attractive to men in the college "culture of romance" (Holland and Eisenhart 1990), it is no wonder that my female informants devote a great deal of time and energy worrying about their weight and food consumption. They are very like Holland and Eisenhart's female informants who "were constantly exposed to societal evaluation—to judgments of their worth—on the basis of their sexual attractiveness to men and . . . much of what they did was addressed to improving or avoiding that evaluation" (1990: 18).

The students' journals reveal that for men eating can be a path to size and power; for women it is a path to thinness and control:

> Being thin seems to be a common goal for women. Whether it is to become thin or to stay thin, women take great pains to moderate their figures. I think that women's struggle to be thin can be paralleled with men's goals to be strong. Not every woman cares about her weight just as not every man cares about his strength. On the whole, however, most women would like to be thin, being thin is attractive and shows control of one's own body. Strength in men is also considered attractive and shows control. It's ironic though, women eat very little to attain their desired state of being; while men eat to "bulk up" and turn their fat to muscle and strength (F/F90).

Although contemporary men, like women, are not supposed to be fat or obsessively voracious in regard to food, they can still eat a lot and be "big." As one student said, "I think my father shows some power and authority because of his big, round belly. It's weird, but I go after my mom more if I see her gaining weight than my father. . . . I agree that men can get away with being overweight more than women" (F/S86). Often male students report wanting to increase their size, whereas females want to reduce themselves. Women are more likely to impose stricter standards of thinness on themselves than men do on either themselves or women (see Miller, Coffman, and Linke 1980). Women are also more likely to perceive themselves as fatter than they actually are (Mable, Balance, and Galgan 1986), showing their internalization of an unreasonable and oppressive cultural standard (Orbach 1978). The different eating behaviors associated with the different sexes parallel their cultural definitions: men are still supposed to be big, powerful, free, and dominant; women are to be small, dainty, constrained, and submissive.

Conclusion: Status Quo and Resistance

In U.S. culture food rules express an ideology of life that focuses on how and what is eaten. College students are primarily guided by their own definitions of good and bad food and concerned with being in control of their eating. For them, eating is not a simple act of fueling the body, it is moral behavior through which they construct themselves as good or bad human beings. Class, race, ethnic, and gender boundaries are maintained by eating differences. Eating daintily separates women from hearty-eating men and concommitantly makes women less powerful. Voluntary restraint and freedom of choice towards food differentiates well-fed well-off people from poor people with hunger and limited ways to satisfy it. College students eat to show they are individuals, to be special, to be moral; they eat to be themselves and to declare their place in the complex race, class, and gender hierarchy in which they live.

For the most part, working and middle-class white students seem to uphold the food rules of their culture. Men's adherence to the rules makes sense, since those are rules that reinforce the privileged status of white males in contemporary United States culture. But women are shackled by the accepted food praxis of U.S. culture. Their conformity to the rules which reaffirm their own subordination demands further analysis.

It is not that women never oppose the food rules; they do. But like Holland and Eisenhart's (1990) college students, their resistance is individual and partial. They do not challenge the basic meaning system which oppresses them. Women subvert the rules by such behaviors as eating in secret, as did the student quoted above who rebelled against her father's imposition of a strictly limited diet by sneaking food or binging at friends' houses. However, she realized that she was harming herself by this behavior for she did not stop her father's denigration of her appearance, she did not lose the weight that caused the denigration, and she felt guilty for secret eating. However, she did find some relief in the food and did gain some autonomy by her secret and limited rebellion.

Other students attempt to subvert the food rules by practicing bulimic behaviors (binging and

purging) in an effort "to have their cake and eat it too" (see Cauwels 1983; Gordon 1990; Boskind-White and White 1983). They eat enormous quantities of food in violation of the rules, but then throw it up, thereby maintaining the appearance of eating in conformity with cultural standards. Unfortunately, however, they lose self-esteem by their devious behavior and may be trapped in a pathological psychological spiral which can lead to serious illness and even death. Some women become anorexic and reduce their food consumption to almost nothing, thereby subverting the food rules by taking them to a radical extreme (Bruch 1973, 1978; Gordon 1990; Lawrence 1984). They too, however, ultimately may place themselves in a life-threatening situation by this behavior, and never manage to gain the autonomy and control that they so desperately seek (Counihan 1988). Other women opt out of the food game altogether by eating with abandon and getting fat. Few, however, manage to do so and maintain their pride and self-respect, so virulently enforced are the cultural codes of thinness and self-control (Millman 1980).

None of my female students shows evidence of organizing collectively to throw out the whole food rules system which enforces their subordination. There is no evidence among students of any movement such as the National Association to Aid Fat Americans (NAAFA) which challenges the cultural hegemony of thinness in the United States.

> The organization asserts that fat can be beautiful, . . . it stresses how fat people and fat admirers are victims of prejudice, stigma, and consequent self-hatred. NAAFA's purpose is to call attention to the exclusion, exploitation, and psychological oppression of fat people and to press for changes in the ways fat people are regarded and treated. Its central message is that it's all right to be fat (Millman 1980: 4).

Why don't female students collectively rebel against the food rules system that oppresses them? There are probably several reasons. First, they may not be able to "see" their own oppression, so thoroughly is the sex-gender hierarchy embedded in U.S. culture. Second, in the peer culture women's ties to each other are secondary to their ties to men, thus making difficult a women's movement. Third, the food rules embody central cultural values. Acceptance of responsibility for controlling one's own eating habits and weight fits in with the Euro-American cultural belief that all make their own destiny. Repeatedly students reaffirm this view in statements such as the following:

> For many years I always felt that it was the person's own fault when they were fat and often wondered how they could do this to themselves. I often thought that they just didn't care about what they looked like and that they deserved to be fat for not taking better care of themselves (F/S86).

And even when students are able rationally to understand that fat may not be a person's "fault," they still are unable emotionally to rid themselves of the belief that fat is "gross" and due to the person's willful negligence.

Finally, collective opposition to the food rules system is subverted because many female students gain some advantages from it. With careful monitoring of their food consumption, they can become "attractive," get men's attention, and achieve a certain status in their peer culture. Furthermore, such status is likely to determine their lives beyond relationships with peers: "ranking by attractiveness and its associated constraints followed the women into the classroom and was likely to follow them into the workplace" (Holland and Eisenhart 1990: 107). Hence, rejecting the food rules system is likely to be met with immediate negative consequences as women lose attractiveness, status, and potential success in the world of peers and work. Following the rules, on the other hand, is likely to produce positive results. It will be difficult for women to reject the food rules of American culture until they are in a position to challenge the sex-gender hierarchy in all of its manifestations.

NOTES

Acknowledgments I am grateful to Phyllis Pease Chock, Lin Emmons, Janet Fitchen, Ellen Messer, Peggy Ratcheson, Jim Taggart, and two anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. I thank Millersville University for travel funds to present a version of this paper at the 89th Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, and my students at Stockton State College and Millersville University for sharing their intimate thoughts about the meaning of food.

[1]Anthropologists of very different theoretical perspectives have studied food to determine the cultural construction of reality. See Barthes (1975); Douglas (1974); Harris (1985); Hull (1986); Kahn (1986); Laderman (1981); Lévi-Strauss (1966); Manderson (1986a, 1986b, 1986c); Meigs (1984); Reid (1986); Weismantel (1988); Young (1986).

[2]See Adams (1990); Brumberg (1988); Frese (1988); Harris (1985); Kahn (1986); Laderman (1983); Manderson (1986); Meigs (1984); Weismantel (1988). Some peoples, such as the Hua of New Guinea (Meigs 1984: 17), make the extrinsic or contagious properties of food prevalent in their alimen-

tary regime. Because their "ideology of life" (p. 27) centers on relationships, they base many of their food rules on beliefs about the harmful or beneficial effects one person may have on another. In the U.S. students define food mainly in terms of its intrinsic properties (p. 22), and emphasize how eating constitutes the self rather than the community.

[3]Whereas the journals contain a fine depiction of students' cultural construction of food rules, they are not so good a source of information on students' actual eating behavior. Students do often write about their behavior, but these descriptions are passed through the filter of their own selection and interpretation. Certain kinds of questions would be better answered through participant-observation than through the journals, for example, questions about how students' actual consumption fits their ideal rules, about how the context of the eating event affects consumption, and about how they actually relate to eating while doing it. In future studies I plan to gather more observational data. I also have data on student eating through food logs that they kept for two weeks, reporting everything they ingested during that time. I refer to these only in the most general terms here and recognize that like all data on food consumption, they are approximate (Quandt and Ritenbaugh 1986).

[4]African American and Hispanic students make up a very small proportion of my sample and thus I am not able to speak about their distinctiveness. This is largely due to the fact that these students are underrepresented at college in general, at Millersville and Stockton in particular, and in my Food and Culture class as well. Similarly, Asian students and those belonging to other ethnic and religious minorities are also underrepresented. Most students are Christian or non-religious. Few or none in my sample belong to Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, Buddhist, or other religious sects with significant dietary prescriptions.

There is a serious dearth of studies which focus on eating habits and attitudes of America's diverse racial, ethnic, and religious populations. As Moore (1988) has argued, anthropology needs to challenge its own racism and sexism by including the experiences of women and people of color into both its data and its theory. Such inclusion will improve the field's ability to generalize and render it more true to its goal of understanding the entire human condition.

There does appear to be a significant difference in the attitudes of African American females towards food and the body from those of Euro-American females. The former diet somewhat less frequently (Emmons 1992) and may have culturally appropriate acceptance of a larger body size (Styles 1980). Furthermore, they appear to have a more self-reliant attitude towards their future and are less likely to conceptualize their lives as based on economic dependence on a man than white college women do (Holland and Eisenhart 1990: 85). This self-reliance may then be related to their less strenuous adherence to the prevalent thinness standards. Among Puerto Ricans in Philadelphia, Massara (1989) argues that weight gain in a woman after marriage is viewed positively. It is a sign that her husband is providing for her, that she is fulfilling her role as a "good wife," and that she is content (1989: 297). Massara, however, does not provide data on younger women, so it is not clear to what extent they adhere to the food rules of Puerto Rican or mainstream Euro-American culture.

[5]Data from student journals is referenced with F=female or M=male, F=Fall semester or S=Spring semester, and year.

[6]See Fitchen (1987) for a discussion of how contradictions between experts on groundwater contamination led to a failure to believe in their prescriptions by the general public.

[7]In the U.S. in the past, as Frese (1989) has documented, male and female foods were defined on the basis of their color and ability to produce blood; red foods were male and white foods were female (see also Brumberg 1988 for beliefs about proper male and female eating in the past).

REFERENCES CITED

Adams, Carol. 1990. *The sexual politics of meat: A feminist-vegetarian critical theory.* New York: Continuum.

Arnold, David. 1988. *Famine: Social crisis and historical change.* New York: Basil Blackwell.

Barthes, Roland. 1975. Toward a psychosociology of contemporary food consumption. In *European diet from pre-industrial to modern times*, ed. Elborg Forster and Robert Forster. New York: Harper and Row.

Beller, Anne Scott. 1977. *Fat and thin: A natural history of obesity.* New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux.

Boskind-White, Marlene and William C. White. 1983. *Bulimarexia: The binge/purge cycle.* New York: Norton.

Bruch, Hilde. 1973. *Eating disorders: Obesity, anorexia nervosa, and the person within.* New York: Basic Books.

———. 1978. *The golden cage: The enigma of anorexia nervosa.* New York: Vintage.

Brumberg, Joan Jacobs. 1988. *Fasting girls: The emergence of anorexia nervosa as a modern disease.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Cauwels, Janice M. 1983. *Bulimia: The binge-purge compulsion.* Garden City NY: Doubleday.

Chernin, Kim. 1981. *The obsession: Reflections on the tyranny of slenderness.* New York: Harper and Row.

Counihan, Carole M. 1985. What does it mean to be fat, thin, and female in the United States? *Food and Foodways* 1: 77-94.

———. 1988. Female identity, food, and power in contemporary Florence. *Anthropological Quarterly* 61: 51-62.

Counihan, Carole M. and Debra Tarbert. 1988. Attitudes toward hunger and fasting in the U.S.: Cultural value and problem. Paper presented at the 87th Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Phoenix AZ.

Douglas, Mary. 1974. Deciphering a meal. In *Myth, symbol and culture*, ed. Clifford Geertz. New York: Norton.

Eliot, T.S. 1961. *Selected poems.* London: Faber and Faber.

Emmons, Lillian. 1986. Food procurement and the nutritional adequacy of diets in low-income families. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* 86(12): 1684-93.

———. 1987. Relationship of participation in food assistance programs to the nutritional quality of diets. *American Journal of Public Health* 77: 856-858.

———. 1992. Dieting and purging behavior in Black and White high school students. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* 92(3), forthcoming.

Fitchen, Janet M. 1987. Cultural aspects of environmental problems: Individualism and chemical contamination of groundwater. *Science, Technology and Human Values* 12(2): 1-12.

———. 1988. Hunger, Malnutrition and poverty in the contemporary United States: Some observations on their social and cultural context. *Food and Foodways* 2: 309-33.

———. 1990. Personal communication.

Frese, Pamela. 1989. The food of life: Gendered food, reproduction, and the life-cycle. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Washington DC.

Freud, Anna. 1946. The psychoanalytic study of infantile feeding disturbances. *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child, An Annual* 2: 119-32.

Garb, Jane L., J.R. Garb, and A.J. Stunkard. 1975. Social factors and obesity in Navajo children. *Proceedings of the First International Congress on Obesity*. London: Newman.

Gordon, Richard A. 1990. *Anorexia and bulimia: Anatomy of a social epidemic*. Cambridge MA: Basil Blackwell.

Gramsci, Antonio. 1955. *Il materialismo storico e la filosofia di Benedetto Croce*. Torino: Einaudi. (Opere di Antonio Gramsci, 2).

Harris, Marvin. 1985. *Good to eat: Riddles of food and culture*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Holland, Dorothy C. and Margaret A. Eisenhart. 1990. *Educated in romance: Women, achievement, and college culture*. Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press.

Horowitz, Helen Lefkowitz. 1987. *Campus life: Undergraduate cultures from the end of the eighteenth century to the present*. Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press.

Hull, Valerie. 1986. Dietary taboos in Java: Myths, mysteries and methodology. In *Shared wealth and symbol: Food, culture and society in Oceania and Southeast Asia*, ed. Lenore Manderson. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Kahn, Miriam. 1986. *Always hungry, never greedy: Food and the expression of gender in a Melanesian society*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Laderman, Carol. 1983. *Wives and midwives: Childbirth and nutrition in rural Malaysia*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Lawrence, Marilyn. 1984. *The anorexic experience*. London: Women's Press.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1966. The culinary triangle. *Partisan Review* 33: 586-95.

Mable, Harriet M., William D.G. Balance, and Richard Galgan. 1986. Body image distortion and dissatisfaction in university students. *Perceptual and Motion Skills* 63: 907-11.

Manderson, Lenore, ed. 1986a. *Shared wealth and symbol: Food, culture and society in Oceania and Southeast Asia*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

———. 1986b. Introduction: The anthropology of food in Oceania and Southeast Asia. In *Shared wealth and symbol: Food, culture and society in Oceania and Southeast Asia*, ed. Lenore Manderson. New York: Cambridge University Press.

———. 1986c. Food classification and restriction in peninsular Malaysia: Nature, culture, hot and cold? In *Shared wealth and symbol: Food, culture and society in Oceania and Southeast Asia*, ed. Lenore Manderson. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Massara, Emily Bradley. 1989. *¡Qué gordita! A study of weight among women in a Puerto Rican community*. New York: AMS Press.

Massara, Emily B. and Albert J. Stunkard. 1979. A method of quantifying cultural ideals of beauty and the obese. *International Journal of Obesity* 3: 149-52.

Mauss, Marcel. 1967. *The gift: Forms and functions of exchange in archaic societies*. New York: Norton.

Meigs, Anna. 1984. *Food, sex and pollution: A New Guinea religion*. New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Miller, T.M., J.G. Coffman, and R.A. Linke. 1980. Survey on body image, weight, and diet of college students. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* 77: 561-66.

Millman, Marcia. 1980. *Such a pretty face: Being fat in America*. New York: Norton.

Moffatt, Michael. 1989. *Coming of age in New Jersey: College and American culture*. New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Moore, Henrietta. 1988. *Feminism and anthropology*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Orbach, Susie. 1978. *Fat is a feminist issue: The anti-diet guide to permanent weight loss*. New York: Paddington.

Quandt, Sara A. and Cheryl Ritenbaugh. 1986. *Training manual in nutritional anthropology*. Washington DC: American Anthropological Association, Special Publication no. 20.

Reid, Janice. 1986. "Land of Milk and Honey": The changing meaning of food to an Australian Aboriginal community. In *Shared wealth and symbol: Food, culture and society in Oceania and Southeast Asia*, ed. Lenore Manderson. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Sahlins, Marshall. 1972. *Stone age economics*. New York: Aldine.

Satter, Ellyn. 1987. *How to get your kid to eat . . . But not too much*. Palo Alto CA: Bull Publishing.

Science and Education Administration. 1980. *Food*. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Home and Garden Bulletin no. 228. Washington DC: Government Printing Office.

Sidel, Ruth. 1990. *On her own: Growing up in the shadow of the American Dream*. New York: Penguin.

Sobal, Jeffrey and Claire Monod Cassidy. 1987. Dieting foods: Conceptualizations and explanations. *Ecology of Food and Nutrition* 20: 89-96.

Stasch, A.R., M.M. Johnson, and G.S. Spangler. 1970. Food practices and preferences of some college students. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* 57: 523-7.

Stunkard, Albert J. 1977. Obesity and the social environment: Current status, future prospects. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 300: 298-320.

Styles, Marvalene. 1980. Soul, Black women and food. In *A woman's conflict: The special relationship between women and food*, ed.

Jane Rachel Kaplan. Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice Hall.
Turner, Victor W. 1969. *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Chicago IL: Aldine.
Weismantel, M.J. 1988. *Food, gender and poverty in the Ecuadorian Andes*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
Young, Michael W. 1986. "The worst disease": The cultural definition of hunger in Kalauna. In *Shared wealth and symbol: Food, culture and society in Oceania and Southeast Asia*, ed. Lenore Manderson. New York: Cambridge University Press.