



Commentary

Critical food guidance

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Abstract

In this themed section, we argue that beyond health-related dietary goals for society, food guidance must also reflect the expanding public awareness and uncertainty about the complexities and vulnerabilities of the current food system. Increasingly influential issues include environmental change, agriculture-related pollution, food worker injustice, animal welfare, persistent household food insecurity, food waste, and fish stock depletion. No form of food guidance can address all these complex phenomena, but many people want to be informed and empowered to make change. Accordingly, academic and citizen groups have been devising an assortment of directives, recommendations, principles, and charters to promote alternative food environments and food behaviours that cumulatively support sustainable food systems. These on-going debates and efforts can collectively be termed *critical food guidance*.

Keywords: Critical food guidance; food guide; dietary sustainability; food sovereignty

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Introduction

From the time infants are weaned, they are nudged towards the acceptance of certain foods that are fed to them. As children grow older, they are encouraged to make specific choices among what is presented, often being told that some foods will make them stronger or healthier, or having preferred foods withheld until less-liked foods are eaten first. Children will learn to shun foods that are considered unsafe or “bad” for them (physically, culturally, or both). They will also learn to regard some foods as distinctive, reserved for special occasions, religious or lifestyle rites, or imbued with seasonal or geographic significance. Thus, food guidance is a recognized aspect of growing up, although it may be minimal in circumstances when food choices are very limited. In much of the world, however, even as a greater abundance of food options becomes available, most people may still feel their choices are directed by certain parameters, and as such are less likely to consume randomly and without limit. This is food guidance—the process by which people learn the norms, values, practices, and assumptions about food.

Where does food guidance originate? Parents and significant others offer guidance through teaching and role modelling. Culture and religion have commonly prescribed types of foods that are acceptable and desirable, and proscribed those to be avoided—often with the goal of honouring traditional foods, or marking one population group as distinct from others. Food corporations and commodity groups indirectly provide food guidance through marketing. Government bodies have, since the mid-twentieth century, released food guides that promoted “healthy” eating patterns in the form of food groups, aiming to nurture strong and healthy populations. Earlier on, in North America, the goals of such dietary guidance were to foster resilient military personnel and a robust labour pool. A parallel goal of state-level guidance was the management of significant food economies. In Canada, for example, earlier food guidance centred mainly around dairy, meat, and wheat (Figure 1).

As scientific research began revealing the association of certain dietary patterns with morbidity and early mortality from chronic disease, the implications for population productivity and state-borne medical costs became clear.¹ Health-based food guides worldwide began to place more emphasis on plant-food sources. Foods high in saturated fat, salt, and sugar were discouraged or deemed “extras”. When nutrition research revealed the benefits of foods rich in soluble fibre and antioxidants, as well as the hazards of trans fats, guidelines were adapted accordingly. Recommended daily servings of meat, especially cured meat, were reduced. Medical organizations joined government health departments to promote this information, and it was enforced in public institutions such as daycares and hospitals (WHO, 1998).

Controversy related to state-based food guides came from several fronts. Developers of food guides in Canada tried to walk the tightrope of depicting health-based food groups while

¹ [History of Canada's Food Guides from 1942 to 2007 - Canada.ca](#)

simultaneously respecting the wishes of large commodity groups such as beef producers; avoiding disputes with global convenience-food corporations; and being silent on trade agreements such as the Canada-European Union Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (which restricts advocacy for locally-produced food). The American MyPyramid showed only coloured segments with a figure ascending the pyramid steps—suggesting, misleadingly, that all types of foods could fit with a “healthy” diet as long as eaters remained active (Chiuve & Willett, 2007).

Another critique was aimed at the focus of food guides on key nutrients (e.g., calcium for the dairy group), which some considered reductionist (Lawrence et al., 2019). Scrinis (2014) labelled this perspective *nutritionism*, as it gave more emphasis to food constituents than to the value of the diet as a whole. He argued in particular that nutritionism enables the food industry to promote highly processed foods such as breakfast cereal or sugary drinks as “healthy” based on added micro-nutrients or claims about individual nutrients (e.g., cholesterol-free). Another example of nutritionism is the common conflation of meat or seafood with protein, although sufficient protein can be obtained from grains, pulses, nuts, seeds, dairy and eggs.

It is not clear that, over several decades, food guides have actually served to steer populations towards healthy eating, thereby lowering the risk of chronic diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease and some cancers (IPES-Food, 2017). Population health data revealed that Canadians are far from meeting dietary requirements according to the standards set by the previous Canada’s Food Guide for Healthy Eating (Garriguet, 2007). It is evident that new types of guidance with a wider range of goals may serve us better.

Recent changes in food guidance

National food guidance has begun to change in recent years. For example, in 2019 the Canadian Dietary Guidelines² replaced the previous emphasis on portion sizes and numbers in favour of proportions of food groups on a plate (Figure 1). The new guide is broader in scope, stating that “healthy eating is more than the foods you eat”. In addition to encouraging whole, mostly plant-based foods, water as a beverage, and minimal consumption of highly-processed foods, the new guidelines promote cooking skills, label reading, eating meals together, awareness of environmental impact, and minimizing food waste.

² <https://food-guide.canada.ca/en/guidelines/>

Figure 1: Canada’s Food Guide in 1977, 1992, and 2019²



The groundbreaking *Dietary Guidelines for the Brazilian Population* issued in 2014 set the stage for this more holistic type of food guidance (Sumner, 2016). It represented a new way of thinking about nourishment and food by emphasizing its sociocultural, health and environmental dimensions (Oliveira & Silva-Amparo, 2018). These changes opened the door to moving beyond conventional conceptions of food guidance to more critical approaches.

Why *critical* food guidance?

Beyond health-related dietary goals for society, we argue that food guidance must also reflect the expanding public awareness and uncertainty about the complexities and vulnerabilities of the current food system. Influential issues that have appeared more recently include water and soil depletion, climate destabilization, loss of biodiversity, injustices for food workers, animal welfare, persistent household food insecurity, food waste, depletion of fish stocks, and agricultural impacts on the natural environment (Goodman et al., 2014; IPES, 2016; Weis, 2013; Winson, 2013; WHO, 2017).

Consequently, academic and citizen groups have been devising an assortment of their own directives, recommendations, principles, and charters to promote alternative food environments and food behaviours that cumulatively support sustainable food systems (Wilkins, 2005). These ongoing debates and efforts can collectively be termed *critical food guidance*. Through critical examination of data, questioning of discourses and assumptions, and exposure of power dynamics (Koç et al., 2017), novel forms of food guidance can emerge.

Who will help create and promote critical food guidance? The contributors to this themed section provide dynamic examples of the actors involved, including Indigenous communities, farmers, hunters and fishers, food policy councils, consumers and educational institutions. They

show how critical food guidance is evolving and dynamic in nature, demanding inquisitive minds, detective work, and ongoing learning rather than conforming to fixed standards or the status quo.

From the perspective of critical food guidance, food ceases to be a faceless, placeless commodity that we consume without consideration of its effects on our bodies, our communities and our planet. Lifting the veil of commodity fetishism (Hudson & Hudson, 2003) by clarifying parameters that drive our food choices is one of the roles of critical food guidance. It also lays the groundwork for fresh solutions. Not a simple endeavour, this will require ongoing research, creative planning, supportive governance, and cultural adaptation. It means engaging with multiple segments of the food economy, locally and globally.

Debate around complex questions forms part of the infrastructure of critical food guidance. Further, critical interrogation of the notion of food guidance itself means we can ask: who is the guidance for, and who isn't it for? Who benefits from the guidance, and who loses?

Pioneers of critical food guidance

Critical food guidance is not new. One of the early advocates was Francis Moore Lappé (1971), the author of *Diet for a Small Planet*. Lappé warned that “our heavily meat-centered culture is at the very heart of our waste of the earth’s productivity” (p. xi). Pointing out that dietary protein did not have to be sourced from meat, she offered guidelines and practical ways of vegetarian eating “that make the most of the earth’s capacity to supply this vital nutrient.”

Two other pioneering advocates of critical food guidance were Joan Dye Gussow and Kate Clancy (1986: p.1). In their seminal article “Dietary Guidelines for Sustainability”, they proposed that “educated consumers need to make food choices that not only enhance their own health but also contribute to the protection of our natural resources”. Twelve years later, Gussow (1999) responded to critics who found the term “sustainable diets” both confusing and threatening. She raised a fundamental question:

How is it that we tend to accept as ‘objective’ assertions that the status quo is just fine and denounce as ‘subjective’ or ‘biased’ statements that question the way things are? (p. 195).

Gussow (1999, p. 199) further argued that “Truly sustainable food systems will be those that provide good jobs for all those working with food and good food for everyone who eats.” Such pioneering efforts laid the groundwork for more recent, comprehensive understandings of sustainable food systems, which involve a

coherent alignment of social justice, support for local economies,
ecological regeneration and deep democratic engagement with producers,

harvesters, processors, retailers, eaters and Indigenous Peoples (Levkoe et al., 2017, p. 5).

Such a critical lens allows us to analyze problems differently, and to design alternative forms of food guidance that can collectively move beyond the status quo.

Parameters for critical food guidance

Various concepts and models contribute to the development of parameters of critical food guidance. One concept is *transformative learning*, which involves “learning that transforms problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, open and emotionally able to change” (Mezirow 2009, p. 22).

One instructive model, from the *Food Counts* report (Levkoe et al., 2017), presents pillars of food sovereignty that can be seen as a framework for critical food guidance, namely:

- building knowledge and skills;
- working with nature;
- valuing food providers;
- localizing food systems;
- putting control locally; and
- recognizing that food is sacred.

On a more operational level, Mason and Lang (2017) have developed guidelines for eating toward sustainability within six arenas: environment, health, social values, quality, economy and governance. For these authors, a sustainable diet:

- achieves balance between energy intake and needs;
- is based on minimally processed foods;
- includes moderate amounts of meat and dairy;
- includes nuts and seeds;
- limits fish and aquatic products to sustainable species
- prefers tap water as a beverage

Building on the above parameters and others, we suggest the following elements of critical food guidance with examples. We imply by this that if positive changes are made in these areas, progress will gradually happen toward a more sustainable food system.

- Health: food literacy, reduced environmental contaminants in food, minimal highly-processed foods, a mostly plant-based diet (unless geography dictates a diet rich in animal foods)

- Environment: healthy soil, safe water, reduced fossil fuel use, biodiversity, decreased food and packaging waste
- Society: environments that promote healthy eating and activity levels, commensality, sharing of resources, food security
- Culture: foods that promote identity, belonging, and intergenerational connection
- Economy: sustainable livelihoods, promotion of local, co-operative, social enterprises, fair trade agreements
- Governance: transparency and public involvement in policy decisions, subsidiarity, food sovereignty, application of the precautionary principle, civil commons, agricultural protectionism
- Ethics: social and environmental justice, the right to food, animal welfare
- Spirituality: respect for food considered to be sacred, beliefs/practices/rituals related to food.

While not exhaustive, these parameters lay the foundation for further work on critical food guidance. The contributors to this special issue begin to fill in the gaps by focusing on the areas of reframing and transforming food guidance, mindful decision-making about food choices, innovative applications of critical food guidance, and specific contexts in which transformation can occur. This emerging field of inquiry is dynamic and fluid, holding enormous promise for food production, consumption and procurement, as well as food studies itself.

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