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You Are What You Eat

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Synonyms

Being; Brillat-Savarin; Feuerbach; Food;
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Introduction

While it is possible to trace the roots of the phrase “you are what you eat” to early Christianity where the body and the blood of Jesus Christ were represented by bread and wine (Gilman 2008), the phrase has become a token statement indicating a strong association between physical well-being and eating, especially in the second half of the twentieth century. In contemporary parlance, “you are what you eat” refers to the idea that one’s eating habits determine and also are a manifestation of the health of the person in question. The phrase became a slogan of healthy eating in the English-speaking world during the 1940s through the efforts of nutritionist Victor Lindlahr with his radio broadcast and then his book entitled *You Are What You Eat: How to Win and Keep Health with Diet*, which sold around half a million copies (Levenstein 1993). During the 1960s, influenced by the hippie

culture, healthy eating became synonymous with embracing a macrobiotic diet that involved whole foods (Gilman 2008). More recently, the phrase gave its name to a popular British TV show presented by nutritionist Gillian McKeith that aired between 2004 and 2007. The book derived from the show also had the same name and gained immense popularity with its emphasis on healthy eating as the key to overall well-being (McKeith 2005).

It can be argued that the statement has close associations with the shift from class to identity politics. Especially with the cultural turn of the 1980s, the phrase has been generally associated with individual choice. Its tone is also consistent with the individual agent’s responsibility and potential to define and redefine self through daily practices, thus also alluding to the character of the individual consumer. On a different level, the phrase also refers to the ways in which the chemical structure of the foods people consume affect the way in which they act. By establishing a link between psychology and chemistry, this perspective attempts to explain the association between the food intake and human behavior such as the relationship between impulsive behavior and sugar intake.

The phrase also has close links with taste. Here, taste does not just refer to the physical appreciation of food, but rather it is both an individual and social experience, which is “. . . embedded within a social and cultural milieu involving habits, norms, rituals and taboos” (Pietrykowski 2004, p. 312). Taste is learned,

and as a socially and historically embedded phenomenon, it is not just a marker of individual identity but connotes a class disposition as well. Therefore, consistent with the incorporation principle that Fischler conceptualizes, it is reasonable to suggest that the phrase “you are what you eat” covers a wide range of action, from the physical and biological relation with food, to the making of the individual consumer, to the delineating of class identity and membership (Fischler 1988). In this regard, what human beings eat helps sustain physical existence; it helps produce their identity both as an individual and as a member of a social group.

Despite the individualistic connotations that seem to indicate that the phrase belongs with contemporary and most often postmodern lifestyles, its roots lie very much with modernity. Below is an overview of the various incarnations of the phrase situated in their historical context. The overview helps demonstrate that to regard the phrase from an individualistic angle is not sufficient. Such a perspective overlooks the wider social, historical, and philosophical undertones of the phrase and as such provides grounds for the ethical/conscious consumer who should be responsible for his/her well-being while disregarding the limitations incurred by the ostensibly “all-knowing” consumer.

Brillat-Savarin and Gastronomy as Science

It is Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin who initially used the phrase in his *Physiologie du Gout, ou Meditations de Gastronomie Transcendante* (The Physiology of Taste) dating back to 1826. In the fourth of the twenty aphorisms, which Brillat-Savarin claims will “. . .serve as prolegomena to his work and eternal basis to the science,” he writes: “Dis-moi que tu manges, je te dirai ce que tu es” (Tell me what kind of food you eat, and I will tell you what kind of man you are) (Drayton 1994). Born into a family of lawyers, Brillat-Savarin did not owe his fame to his learned professions of law and politics. Rather, he became known as one of the most prominent

pioneers of gastronomy of his times along with Grimod de la Reynière (Mennell 2008).

In general, Brillat-Savarin’s work can be interpreted as part of an effort to establish gastronomy as a scientific as well as a modern discipline and to divorce it from earlier connotations of religious thinking that associated food with gluttony. He goes to great lengths to write a history of cooking, a philosophical one, where he traces the history of human beings’ relation with food and cooking which he considers “the oldest of the arts” (Brillat-Savarin 2008a, p. 93). In this long history, humanity has arrived at a point, he argues, that the “word *gastronomy* has been revived from the Greek; it sounds sweetly in French ears, and although imperfectly understood, simply to pronounce it is enough to bring a joyful smile to every face” (Brillat-Savarin 2008a, p. 108). Brillat-Savarin (2008b) further expresses his dissatisfaction with the commonsensical definition of *gourmandism*, which he says exposes “an endless confusion between *gourmandism*. . .and *gluttony* or *voracity*” (p. 107). In this meditation, he first provides a long list of various definitions of the term. None of these definitions alludes to gluttony, and all of them point to a rational, moderate, and moral engagement with food. From a moral standpoint, he argues, *gourmandism* is a sign of “implicit obedience to the commands of the Creator,” for it is God who gave us the appetite, and it is our duty to fulfill this to the best of our ability (Brillat-Savarin 2008b, p. 107–108). Brillat-Savarin emphatically lists the numerous advantages of *gourmandism*. *Gourmandism* is advantageous not just for the individual but for societies in general. It helps industries stay alive and grow; it fosters connections among nations; overall, it is good for civilization. Brillat-Savarin’s work can be read as part of a discourse that emerged in the post-French Revolution era that associated gastronomy with the civilizing process. It was also during this period that the interest of the bourgeoisie in foodways increased as did the number of cooks who ran public eating places after their emancipation from the kitchens of aristocracy (Spang 2000).

Brillat-Savarin associates the rise of gastronomy with modernity, and his effort can be read as

an attempt to inform diners of modern foodways (Ferguson 1998). The association of gastronomy with modernity was not limited to distinguishing eating from sin or merely positing it as a bodily function. The act itself was also what distinguished human beings from animals. As the second aphorism stated: “Animals fill themselves; man eats. The man of mind alone knows how to eat.” Furthermore, Brillat-Savarin’s focus on taste and his effort to locate the scope of gastronomy as a “sociological enterprise” that brought together the “scholar, the chemist, and the political economist” delineated this new science as a marker of collective identity. His experimental studies on eating habits of different social groups helped him work out the concept of the “gastronomic class” which closely associated with social class. It is in this line of thinking one should locate the statement, “Tell me what kind of food you eat, and I will tell you what kind of man you are.” Not only does gastronomy allow for an informed approach to food and foodways, but it also helps establish a modern society with informed and enlightened citizens. Furthermore, when one has a better grasp of gastronomy and the history of eating, they will have essential tools to understand the character, the disposition, and the place of people within society. Food is much more than simply sustenance, it is the lens through which one can understand society and detect social dynamics.

Feuerbach’s Sensationalism: “Man Is What He Eats”

Less concerned with the civilizing aspect of the food than with the philosophical endeavor to understand the ontological and epistemological being of humankind in the era of enlightenment, Ludwig Feuerbach wrote “Man is what he eats” (*Der Mensch ist was er isst*) during the 1850s. Feuerbach wrote these words in his review of Moleschott’s work on natural philosophy. The work entitled *Lehre der Nahrungsmittel* (Teachings on Foodstuff or Theory on Nutrition) had a considerable impact on Feuerbach, who was calling for an alliance with philosophy in

lieu of religion in his scholarship. In search for this alliance, Feuerbach realized the significance of the mundane task of eating, and thus food, on human being’s very existence. Later, his critiques took the phrase, which he had written toward the end of his scholarship, out of its context, and used it as an evidence that Feuerbach was placing too strong an emphasis on the significance of senses in gaining an understanding of the world and thus acting as a crude materialist (Hook 1994).

As Hook convincingly argues, it would be naive to state that Feuerbach was too excited to have rediscovered the wheel. Rather, his fascination of the link between something very tangible such as food and an ontological and epistemological stance of being and existence can be interpreted as a progressive step beyond knowing and making sense of the world through sensory experience. The phrase indicated that even sensory experience was not adequate, that humans needed something much more tangible yet more basic. Food is crucial here: not only does eating connect people to their surrounding world in ways in which other experiences cannot, but they simply have to eat not just to survive but also to be able to contemplate. The emphasis on food allowed the philosopher to unearth the indissoluble link between the mind and the body, the spirit, and the nature.

To overemphasize the statement “one is what one eats” without focusing on the larger body of ideas with which Feuerbach was engaging results in a lopsided interpretation of Feuerbach’s work. It was Feuerbach’s attempt to reject extreme forms of Hegelian idealism as well as absolute materialism. Transcending Hegelian idealism, not only did Feuerbach place the human being at the central stage and attempt to develop an anthropomorphic philosophy but also called for a new philosophy divorced from religion. There were two implications of this perspective: Since this new philosophy put the human beings at the center, their needs and interests should be the focus of philosophy, not a futile attempt to get at a higher good or unattainable truth. The new philosophy, then, should find ways to free humanity from previous bonds and help attain political freedom. In this respect, the statement

refers to an effort to ground human beings' well-being and freedom in their worldly dealings with nature, not in an abstract concept such as religion. Because "man is what he eats," it is through understanding and substantiating the link between the human being and nature can philosophy fulfill its end.

Secondly, situating the human being as the central focus and thus making him the active subject of making philosophy, not a conduit for getting at a larger truth, necessitated a refocus on the tools at his disposal, other than a Cartesian focus on mind, and thinking alone. It is true that when Descartes uttered the action of thinking, he implied something much more than mere contemplation, and he included sensing to his wide catalog of what thinking was comprised of. Feuerbach, on the other hand, conceived of a more direct connection between sensory experience and knowledge. Since man was the measure of all things, the way in which he could know the world would define the limits of his knowledge, therefore should be the only criterion of existence. For Feuerbach, the best and perhaps the only way man could know the world was through day-to-day dealings with nature to secure his livelihood. From this angle, the statement "man is what he eats" can be interpreted as the essential form with which the human being is embedded in and linked to the nature. The human being has to deploy nature in order to sustain, and this necessity imposes limits over knowledge of the world. Yet, this necessity also allows philosophy to locate its true task by placing the human being at the epicenter of this enterprise. This anthropocentric conceptualization of existence and knowledge also informed Feuerbach's scholarship on developing a psychological interpretation of religion, an area for which he is most well known, aside from Marx and Engel's "theses."

According to Feuerbach, neither idealism nor materialism could account for a full-fledged conceptualization of the human being, his existence, and relation with the surrounding world since both perspectives overlook the true nature of human being, who is a creature of space and time and one who is active but at the same time

limited and needy (Hook 1994). During the 1850s, in his later writings, Feuerbach looked for ways in which he could "...solve the traditional puzzle of mind and body through the idea of sensibility" (Turner 1996, p. 70).

Even though the temporal and spatial aspect of man's existence implicates his limits in getting a sense of the world in a more complete fashion, it also implies a promising potential since in this perspective, the world, or nature to be more precise, is not an isolated, external existence; thus, the relation to it becomes more meaningful as it is human's own making. This alludes to the creative nature of human beings which manifests itself as he handles the world surrounding him and implies a positive and creative engagement with nature rather than a subsumed one. One can further point out that it was this conception that Marx took as his departure point when accounting for alienation in his 1844 *Manuscripts* (Tucker 1978). It was Feuerbach's argument, later followed by Marx and Engels, that it was through human being's deployment of nature that he could get an understanding of his very existence and the world. Since humans are shaped by their needs and wants, food becomes an excellent choice through which the philosopher can understand how exactly they deploy nature and what we can learn from this about existence. Because it is through food and eating that nature, which has an external objectivity, becomes an internal subjectivity: "We are linked to external reality by our physiological needs, but this is an active linkage since external reality is literally appropriated and internalized by consumption" (Turner 1996, p. 185).

This rudimentary overview helps explain Feuerbach's enthusiasm for the nascent experimental studies on organic chemistry at his time. His willingness to incorporate Moleschott's work on nutrition can be interpreted in this light. "Sustenance," writes Feuerbach, "only is substance. Sustenance is the identity of spirit and nature. Where there is no fat, there is no flesh, no brain, no spirit. But fat comes only from Sustenance. . . Everything depends upon what we eat and drink" (cf. Hook 1994, p. 268). This stance constitutes a challenge to the infamous Cartesian statement "I think, therefore, I am." According to

Feuerbach, for thinking to take place, being should be secured by the essential practice of sustenance. Therefore, thinking and being were inextricably linked (Turner 1996). What's more, the kinds of foodstuff a human being consumes affect the ways in which he thinks. Thus, man is truly what he eats, for not only does eating ensure thinking, but also the substance of the act of thinking relies on the food consumed. For Descartes, the very fact that humans are thinking beings imply that God exists, for through the ability to think they can come to the realization of a perfect Being who implanted that thought in their mind. Feuerbach takes a step back and looks at the predicate of the act of thinking and situates sustenance right there. How is one supposed to think, if one does not get adequate sustenance?

While Feuerbach places man as a spatial and temporal being at the center of his philosophical endeavors, he does not leave his subject alone with his needs, wants, and limitations. One of Feuerbach's significant claims was that was a social being. Thus, the very act of sustenance affects humans not just as individual beings but also as part of a collective. The food intake, Feuerbach argues, has a direct influence on the way in which human beings behave and feel. Since man is part of a larger group, how he feels and behaves also have repercussions on the overall behavior of the collective as a whole. From this assertion, Feuerbach makes a powerful inference about class behavior. Because working-class people mainly live on potatoes, he states, which lack essential nutritional qualities, they lack the strength to overthrow the wealthy, thus lead a revolution. He writes: "What is eaten turns to blood, the blood to heart and brain, to the stuff of thought and temperament. Human fare is the foundation of human culture and disposition. Do you want to improve the people? Then instead of preaching against sin, give them better food. Man is what he eats" (cf. Hook 1994, p. 270).

Summary

This overview of the origins of the phrase helps uncover its modern connotations. Unlike the

emphasis on the ethical consumer citizen, who is responsible and is expected to be aware of her patterns of consumption and thus has everything at her own disposal to become healthy if only she has the willpower, the earlier incarnations of the phrase delineate either the structure of the field (as in the case of gastronomy as a modern discipline) which the subjects' actions help build but also impose limitations on these actions or food as a conduit through which they can gain an understanding of the world and of ourselves. Even though this stance may be seen as less liberating for the individual, it is also worth mentioning that such conceptualization is more conducive to creating a collective character and even collective action. It is this angle that the individualistic interpretations of the phrase tend to overlook.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Brillat-Savarin and Food](#)
- ▶ [Food and Class](#)
- ▶ [Gluttony](#)
- ▶ [Rousseau and Food](#)
- ▶ [Taste, Distaste, and Food](#)

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Youth Food Activism

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Introduction

Young people have historically played a significant role in social movements. Currently, there is an increase in youth organizing, spurred in part by rising levels of inequality and an increase in the engagement of young people in civic activities. One such area that is witnessing increasing youth involvement is the social movement for food justice (Steel 2010), a rapidly growing movement focused on efforts to address and advocate for healthier, local, affordable, safe, equitable, sustainable food and food systems. With a rise in obesity and other noncommunicable, diet-related health problems and the persistence of food insecurity among many vulnerable populations, the involvement of young people in this movement has the potential to bring forth transformative changes to the food system and thus reduce food-related health problems. This is particularly important as a disproportionate percentage of minorities bear the burden of obesity, food insecurity, and its health consequences.

This entry will first briefly describe the food justice social movement, with a focus on the United States, followed by a description of several ways in which young people are participating in and engaging with this movement. Given the dearth of literature on youth food activism specifically, this entry will end with a review of the pathways into and impact of youth activism in general.

Food Justice: A Social Movement

Gottlieb and Joshi define food justice as “ensuring that the benefits and risks of where, what, and how food is grown and produced, transported and distributed, and accessed and eaten are shared fairly” (Gottlieb and Joshi 2010). The Institute for Food and Development Policy/Food First defines food justice as “a movement that attempts to address hunger by addressing the underlining issues of racial and class disparity and the inequities in the food system that correlate to inequities to economic and political power” (Harper et al. 2009). These definitions illustrate the multifaceted nature of this relatively new, emerging social movement. Taking place on local, national, and global levels, this movement addresses diverse issues including economic development, hunger, race, racism, ethnicity, class, gender, and health and is closely tied with others such as the immigration, labor, gender equality, and environmental sustainability social movements (Holt-Gimenez 2011). This is reflected in the vision for the US food system that was laid out at the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy’s Food + Justice = Democracy conference held in the Fall 2012, which emphasized six food justice principles: (1) historical trauma; (2) local foods, community development, and public investment; (3) food sovereignty; (4) land; (5) labor and immigration; and (6) toxic-free and climate-just food system.

The food justice movement can be thought of as comprising several separate movements, for instance, movements focused on production (e.g., local, organic, safe, fair production), consumption (e.g., school food, anti-marketing), and

both production and consumption (e.g., farm bill, food security). The common goal of these movements is to have a “food system that promotes the health of people as well as the environment,” (Nestle 2009) or conversely, that “today’s food and farming economy is ‘unsustainable’ – that it can’t go on in its current form much longer without courting a breakdown of some kind, whether environmental, economic, or both” (Pollan 2010).

The issue of food and health has thus been transformed into a burgeoning food justice movement, with a growing number of active and visible advocacy groups protesting the practices of big agricultural corporations, widely released films and film festivals, books (e.g., *Fast Food Nation*, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*), and primetime TV shows starring celebrity chefs (e.g., *Jamie Oliver’s Food Revolution*). A growing critique of this mass media attention on food, however, is its predominant focus on individual-level behavior and a lack of focus on the role of politics and social justice (Guthman 2007). Along these lines, researchers have recently again called attention to the important role of social influences on health and health inequities. Among the fundamental determinants of health conditions studied are income inequality, poverty, racism, and lack of opportunities for participating in democratic decisions (Braverman et al. 2011; Rogers et al. 2012). For many of these, social movements and activism have been identified as a promising solution (Birn 2009), highlighting the importance of understanding how and why social movements arise in response to health problems.

In public health, there has been a major push to address food and food policies in order to reduce health inequalities around diet-related illnesses and improve public health. Some examples include policies to increase access to healthy foods and decrease access to unhealthy foods (e.g., zoning of fast food restaurants, limits on advertising) and programs to engage young people and community members in skills-based learning, such as community gardening and cooking. The impact of these approaches, while successful on some levels, has yet to

dramatically transform the landscape of food environments. One promising avenue for realizing transformative change is through youth-led advocacy and organizing (Millstein and Sallis 2011).

Youth Organizing: Overview

The field of youth organizing has garnered attention from an array of disciplines, including sociology, psychology, social work, education, and public health. Given its multilevel, intra-, and interdisciplinary approach, numerous theories and concepts have been used to describe and operationalize the processes and outcomes of youth organizing, including youth empowerment, youth development, civic engagement, and sociopolitical development (Christens and Kirshner 2011). The Funders’ Collaborative on Youth Organizing (FCYO), a coalition working to advance youth organizing as a strategy for youth development and social transformation, defines youth organizing as “an innovative youth development and social justice strategy that trains young people in community organizing and advocacy, and assists them in employing these skills to alter power relations and create meaningful institutional change in their communities” (Funders’ Collaborative on Youth Organizing 2011). Despite diverse theoretical and applied approaches, common features of youth organizing include focusing on youth-driven issues, challenging traditional norms around power, using collaborative approaches to social and systems change and collective decision-making processes, and being adult supported (Christens and Dolan 2011). Within this field, there is a continuum of youth participation, ranging from youth involvement in social activism to youth-driven activism within an adult-led movement to youth-led organizing.

The issues that are addressed in youth organizing settings are generally locally based, youth-selected, and contextualized within larger political and social justice frameworks (Christens and Kirshner 2011). A 2010 survey of 160 youth organizing groups in the country found that the

most common issues addressed among youth organizing groups include education justice/education reform (65 %), community and neighborhood improvement (50 %), racial justice (50 %), economic justice (38 %), environmental justice (37 %), and health (37 %) – which included environmental work, in addition to food justice (Torres-Fleming et al. 2010).

Youth participation and leadership is crucial to public health, where leadership has been defined as “speaking out about injustice, and being prepared to take up the fight within our own field as well as in the broader society. . .and to contribute our specific expertise while recognizing that we have much to learn from the expertise of others” (Krieger 1990). Public health, a field rooted in the tenets of social justice, tries to address the multiple and complex pathways to disadvantage and works towards improving health of populations and reducing health inequalities by breaking down ethical, political, economic, and social barriers to equality (Beauchamp 1999; Gostin and Powers 2006). In a recent review of the World Health Organization’s report *Closing the Gap in a Generation (CGG)*, Birn (2009) calls for greater political activism and advocacy in public health practice and urges more attention to the historical and present role of social justice movements in reducing health inequity. For example, researchers are beginning to point to social movements and in particular building on current movements with similar behavioral end goals, as a strategy for addressing obesity (Dietz and Robinson 2008; Robinson 2010). Such an approach shifts the focus from targeting individual-level behavior and towards elements of social movements (e.g., identity formation, social interaction) that may result in health benefits and obesity prevention as a “side effect” (Robinson 2010). Organizations dedicated to positive youth development and youth leadership embody these beliefs and practices of political action by engaging young people in understanding historical and current political, social, and cultural contexts. In this way, they seek to positively transform their communities, as can be seen with the food justice movement.

Youth and Food Activism

Rooted in Community National Network, a “national grassroots network that empowers young people to take leadership in their own communities” has created the Youth Food Bill of Rights, which states the following rights: (1) We have the right to culturally affirming food, (2) we have the right to sustainable food, (3) we have the right to nutritional education, (4) we have the right to healthy food at school, (5) we have the right to genetic diversity and GMO-free food, (6) we have the right to poison-free food, (7) we have the right to beverages and foods that do not harm us, (8) we have the right to local food, (9) we have the right to fair food, (10) we have the right to good food subsidies, (11) we have the right to organic food and organic farmers, (12) we have the right to cultivate unused land, (13) we have the right to save our seed, (14) we have the right to an ozone layer, (15) we have the right to support our farmers through direct market transactions, (16) we have the right to convenient food that is healthy, and (17) we have the right to leadership education.

While the food movement is generally new and burgeoning, there are numerous youth-centered programs, organizations, and activities working towards the goals of food justice. The diversity of the goals and issues of the food movement affords multiple ways to categorize food justice work and strategies for engaging young people. These include goals of working with young people, for example, nutrition education, skills and job training, and youth empowerment or leadership skills. This ties in closely with the consideration of level or degree of youth engagement within organizations – from offering education or services, to being adult led but youth engaged, to being fully youth led. Additionally, programs may focus on a specific area of the food justice movement, such as urban agriculture, community food access, institutional or school food, and food policy. Lastly, the reach and scope of youth food activism can range from large-scale, national-level organizations to classroom- and school-based programs.

More specifically, a 2007 report found that there were 151 youth in sustainable food systems programs in the United States, Canada, and Puerto Rico. Of the 41 organizations that responded to a survey, 95 % manage agriculture or gardening education programs and 73 % offer nutrition and health programs, while only 27 % get involved in food policy legislation (The Food Project 2007).

Urban agriculture and sustainable farming offers ways for young people to learn how to grow food and become engaged in addressing local food production and food access. Such programs may offer opportunities in the form of internships or summer employment to young people to work in community gardens, school gardens, and farmers' markets while learning about food and nutrition, leadership, and social justice. Programs such as these emphasize job creation and training for young people, responsibility, leadership development, creation of safe spaces, and opportunities to contribute to their neighborhoods.

Programs working on community food access, on the other hand, may focus on food insecurity and health inequities through efforts like reducing the availability and consumption of unhealthy foods in poor, underserved neighborhoods. These efforts may involve conducting community food assessments to understand the availability of and access to food in different neighborhoods. These types of programs reflect the importance of youth and community-based participatory research and environmental and economic injustices as they relate to food and health.

Activism around school and institutional food is also a major area for youth involvement. There are national-level organizations (e.g., Real Food Challenge) working to advocate for and improve food procurement and food systems connected to universities and colleges. Elementary, middle, and high schools are also engaging young people to improve school food and cafeteria environments. Efforts may span local sourcing, availability of healthier and fresh foods, school gardens, and nutrition.

Youth activism in food policy is another form of youth involvement whereby young people are

becoming involved in their local food policy council, which is a group of representatives from diverse sectors of the food system that seeks to “identify and propose innovative solutions to improve local or state food systems, spurring local economic development and making food systems more environmentally sustainable and socially just” (Harper et al. 2009).

In addition to building and supporting the food justice movement, mobilization and engagement of young people in food activism fosters leadership and empowerment. In this way, the impact of youth activism extends beyond the individual activists and their specific issues into communities and societies (Sutton et al. 2006), forming critical social capital for public health and health-based social movements.

Factors Associated with Youth Engagement

Given the dearth of literature on youth food activism specifically, an overview of factors that influence how young people become involved in social justice work in general, and the impact of their work, is warranted.

Political activism is very much embedded in psychological, social, cultural, and political contexts. Children start developing an age-appropriate understanding of the world on a macro level well before adolescence. This includes perceiving realities of their world, hopes for the future, and how they want to be involved in shaping their futures (Chana 2007). In fact, civic engagement is a critical element of the transition between adolescence and adulthood, where during adolescence, young people start to become aware of political and social issues and join related groups and, during late adolescence, they start conceiving a plan for the future (Flanagan and Levine 2010). Key developmental phases of building leadership and fostering civic engagement include recruitment into youth organizing activities, skills development, formal education, and training (Ginwright 2010).

An interest in politics, often developed early in childhood or adolescence, can also be due in

large part to the role of the family. Factors such as political involvement, family values (e.g., responsibility, ethics), educational attainment, and exposure to social problems and inequities can sometimes lead young people into similar fields.

Beyond the role of family, an extensive evaluation of transformative youth development programs found that providing young people with equal opportunities and decision-making capabilities is crucial for effective personal and community-level change (Sutton et al. 2006). Key organizational factors that contribute to effective youth organizing include the fostering of agency and ownership, attention to self-identity, provision of adult support, and structures for opportunities. Organizations that link youth leadership development with community development and social change and offer hands-on and meaningful opportunities for action are also a powerful influence on the development of young activists (Shah 2011). Social justice-oriented and youth-oriented organizations offer a much-needed safe space and social venue for young people to develop a sense of critical and social analysis of inequality and to connect with others while doing so, thereby fostering a collective identity (Christens and Speer 2011; Watts and Flanagan 2007). As one sociologist noted, “merely joining an organization will not turn one into a political activist if the context of that organization does not provide the individual with the cognitive engagement, capacity for political discussion, and, most importantly, political network connections needed in order to take action” (Walker 2008).

Another organizational-level factor is the notion of social movement organizations (SMO), which are organized components and building blocks of a social movement that are oriented towards movement goals. Or as Lofland describes, SMOs are “associations of persons making idealistic and moralistic claims about how human personal or group life ought to be organized that, at the time of their claims-making, are marginal to or excluded from mainstream society – the then dominant constructions of what is realistic, reasonable, and moral”

(Lofland 2009). SMOs offer a platform for which to understand how people become involved in social movements and activism. For example, the community development organizations, school-based organizations, and youth-led coalitions described earlier could be considered social movement organizations for the food justice movement.

Impacts of Youth Activism

The potential beneficial individual-level outcomes of youth participation in social action are numerous. Increasing evidence demonstrates that young people who are actively involved in their communities in meaningful roles, such as engagement in advocacy and activism, have better developmental (e.g., social skills, teamwork, initiative, responsibility), educational (e.g., attainment, motivation, intentions to go to college), psychosocial (e.g., leadership, confidence), sociopolitical (e.g., critical awareness of power, increased sense of agency), and health (e.g., quality of life, locus of control, self-efficacy) outcomes.

Additionally, youth participation is viewed as a critical and powerful process for strengthening knowledge and transferrable skills (e.g., research, strategic thinking, public speaking) and addressing institutional and systems-level changes, such as health inequalities of young people. Those who take part in social action as youth have been shown to have stronger ties with their communities and a greater understanding of their own health status and behavior. This can lead an increased sense of empowerment, as well as improved health outcomes and the potential to become local health advocates (Christens and Dolan 2011; Suleiman et al. 2006; Syme 2000). It is important to note that these types of outcomes are not universal and the ways in which they differ by individual or experience need further exploration.

On a community level, the media and public consistently characterize young people with negative stereotypes – of challenging authority, succumbing to negative peer pressure, dealing

with conflict, engaging in violence or other risky behavior, etc. (Camino and Zeldin 2002). This, in conjunction with few and inequitable opportunities for young people to be civically engaged, reinforces stereotypes that young people are uninterested in and unable to engage with communities and participate in social change. Youth-serving organizations, however, can challenge these norms and shift how communities and adults consider young people by reframing the perception of youth as “problems” of society to “resources” or agents of change (Checkoway et al. 2005; Zeldin et al. 2000). An evaluation of youth organizations supports these findings. Youth who worked with adults and participated in decision-making processes within an organization positively altered adults’ perceptions of young people’s social and cognitive competence, responsibility, contribution, and commitment (Zeldin et al. 2000). While there are challenges with attributing specific community-level outcomes to young people in decision-making roles (as this requires a long-term assessment within and across multiple organizations and agencies) (Zeldin et al. 2000), changes in norms on all levels are critical for establishing conditions for policy change (Nathanson 1999).

Summary

The food justice movement is a rapidly growing social movement aimed at addressing and advocating for healthier, local, affordable, safe, equitable, sustainable food and food systems. Given the rise in obesity and other noncommunicable, diet-related health problems and the persistence of food insecurity among many vulnerable populations, the involvement of young people in this movement has the potential to bring forth transformative changes to the food system and thus reduce food-related health problems. This is particularly important as a disproportionate percentage of minorities bear the burden of obesity, food insecurity, and its health consequences. While this entry focuses on the United States, young people all over the world are engaging in this movement, identifying as food activists and

transforming communities – through community gardening and sustainable farming, nutrition education, farmer’s markets, food policy councils, anti-marketing campaigns, policy advocacy, and much, much more.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Community-Supported Agriculture](#)
- ▶ [Environmental Justice and Food](#)
- ▶ [Food and Health Policy](#)
- ▶ [Urban Agriculture](#)

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