

SOC 190.1: FOOD CHOICE, HEALTH, AND INEQUALITY

UC Berkeley, Fall 2021

INSTRUCTOR

Caitlin Daniel, PhD (she/her)

Email: cdaniel@berkeley.edu

OH: Monday, 12:30-2 PM, Room 484 Soc Sci Building

Sign-up: <https://www.wejoinin.com/sheets/siwtw>

CLASS MEETING

Mon. 10-12 PM, Social Sciences Building 402

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Food and diet-related health have become a pressing topic in research, policy and public discourse. This concern stems in part from the fact that disadvantaged groups tend to have poorer diets than their more advantaged peers. In order to understand these dietary disparities, we will examine how people's food choice is related to their material resources, to their social circumstances, and to the meaning that they attach to—and derive from—food. Additionally, we will consider how the public imagines that disadvantaged people eat and how these ideas themselves relate to social inequalities. In addressing these issues, we will consider several core questions: 1) How do patterns of food consumption *reflect* existing inequalities?; 2) How do patterns of food consumption *contribute to* social inequalities?; 3) How do cultural *constructions* of what other people eat also contribute to inequality?, and 4) Are food-related inequalities driven by those at the bottom of the socioeconomic spectrum or by those at the top? While these questions focus on food, they will help us to think about structure, culture, agency, consumption, and stigma more generally.

LEARNING GOALS

- To understand dominant explanations of socioeconomic differences in food choice
- To appreciate how sociology enhances explanations of food choice, with its focus on the social value of food and on the interaction between structure and culture
- To extend our understanding of food choice to contemporary policy issues and to our own lives
- To gain familiarity with key classical and contemporary writings on food, health, and consumption
- To develop the skills of analytic reading, writing, and thinking, throughout the course and through an extended final paper

COURSE COMPONENTS AND REQUIREMENTS

Attendance and Participation (30%)

As a capstone seminar, this course is a co-production between instructor and students. Unlike a lecture, it focuses much less on an instructor presenting knowledge and more on all of us digesting and grappling with knowledge together. Thus, how much you benefit from this experience depends on everyone contributing to our collective engagement with the course material. How do we do this? Come ready to dig into important ideas. To do so, read and think about the assigned readings. Write your weekly memos. Identify question you want to discuss, whether it's an exciting idea you want to pursue further or a confusing idea you want clarified. **BRING YOUR READINGS**

TO CLASS. Because discussion is so central to this course, the maximum possible attendance and participation grade for students who don't speak up is a B. (This means that you can have perfect attendance, but still get a B for attendance and participation.) If you feel shy or intimidated about speaking up, let me know, and we can think of ways to support your contribution to class.

Weekly Memos (20%)

Each week, you will write a memo (450-500 words) on the assigned readings (and video, where relevant). These memos will help you to systematize your thinking in preparation for class. They'll also help me to see what you find interesting, confusing, or unconvincing. I will draw on your memos to facilitate classroom discussion, so be ready to discuss your memo (and to be called on if need be). If you are uncomfortable speaking up in class, let me know, and we can develop a strategy to support your participation. Logistics: A week in advance, I will post two writing prompts to Assignments in bCourses. Choose whichever one you think will help you prepare for discussion. Memos are graded credit/no credit. To receive credit, memos must engage all the readings.

Memos are due on Sunday by 10 AM. This will give me time to review them before class. Late memos receive NO credit. If you would like written feedback on your first memo, let me know. This can be a helpful check on your writing. Thereafter, I will be available to give feedback in office hours.

Final Paper (50%)

A final paper (13-18 pgs) is your opportunity to examine in-depth an aspect of food choice and inequality that interests you. You can address your topic in one of three ways: 1) a literature review; 2) an analysis of a current event or policy issue; or 3) an analysis of cultural representations of food choice and the people making those choices (e.g., in documentary films, newspaper articles, TV shows, magazines, social media platforms, etc.). Four assignments will build up to the final paper.

- a. Two possible paper topics (DUE Sept. 20)
- b. Paper proposal: one paper topic and the data sources you will use (DUE Oct. 7)
- c. Annotated bibliography and description of data/sources (DUE Oct. 28)
- d. Summary of emerging findings and paper outline (DUE Nov. 15)
- e. Final paper due Dec. 15 at 11:59PM

Assignments a. and b. will be graded credit/no credit. The others will receive a letter grade.

GRADE BREAKDOWN

Assignment	Percentage	Due Date
Participation	30%	All semester
Weekly Memos	20%	Sundays 12 PM
Two Possible Paper Topics	3%	Sept. 20
Paper Proposal	3%	Oct. 7 (THURS)
Annotated Bibliography, Data Description	7%	Oct. 28 (THURS)
Emerging Findings and Outline	7%	Nov. 15

Final Paper	30%	Dec. 15
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GRADING

This course has a total of **1000 points**:

Final paper: **500 points**

Attendance and participation: **300 points**

Weekly memos: **200 points**

A	94-100%	B+	88%-89.99%	C+	78%-79.99%	D+	68%-69.99%
A-	90-93.99%	B	84-87.99%	C	74-77.99%	D	64-67.99%
		B-	80-83.99%	C-	70-73.99%	F	<63.99%

Incomplete Grades: Incompletes are the last resort for students experiencing true medical or other emergencies that make it impossible for them to complete their coursework on time. To be considered for an incomplete grade, students need to speak with me about it DURING the semester, and you must provide documentation of the reason for the request.

If you need **accommodations** for a disability or medical condition, or have a conflict due to university sports or the observance of religious holidays, please email or speak with me early in the semester.

MATERIALS

Materials include academic articles, book chapters, news articles, and videos on YouTube. These materials will be available in a course reader from Copy Central. I will also post academic articles to bCourses under “Files.” Book chapters will be available in digital form through the UC Berkeley library. While some books have unlimited access, others have limited access, meaning that only one copy can be checked out at a time. Your best chance of snagging one of these limited-access e-Reserves is not waiting until the last moment. See e-Reserves here: <https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#inbox/FMfcgzGkZkZWjNvLxHmPZTbgpMFsRtst>

COURSE EXPECTATIONS and POLICIES

Participation and Preparation

Participation requires preparation. When new material proves challenging, it helps to approach it systematically. The following questions may help you. They will also guide our discussion:

1. What is the research question? Why is that question important?
2. What is the main argument? (try to distill into three or four points)
3. How convincing is the argument? What are its strengths and weaknesses? If you’re unconvinced, what would the author have to do to persuade you?
4. What about the argument is unclear or confusing? *Why* am I confused? What do I need to work through that confusion?

Absences are excused for health issues, personal emergencies, religious observances, and job interviews. You will need to show documentation of the reason for your absence. You are still accountable for the material covered in missed classes.

Assignment Submission

Assignments are due on bCourses by 11:59 PM the day they are due, unless indicated otherwise. Late assignments lose a letter grade for each day (or fraction thereof) that they are late.

Other Devices

Non-assistive devices like your phone, computer, or tablet compromise your learning by splitting your attention. Keep them out of sight and turned off while class is in session. Studies show that the mere presence of a cell phone can be distracting. You will lose a whole letter grade for attendance and participation FOR THE SEMESTER if I see you using your phone or computer without permission. Let's focus!

Email

I will respond to emails once a day, excluding weekends, when I check email sporadically. If your question is answered on the syllabus or a handout, don't be disappointed if I don't reply.

Classroom Culture and Academic Citizenship

We have the opportunity to engage important scholarly debates that will deepen our understanding of current social issues and our own lives. Meaningful engagement depends on everyone feeling comfortable with sharing their thoughts—and their confusion. It will help if we all approach this course with curiosity and humility. Curiosity involves wanting to understand what other people think and why. It also involves interrogating why *we* think what we think. Humility requires recognizing that we don't always have the answer and that we might be wrong. After all, many of our beliefs are based on intuition rather than careful analysis. Learning involves examining our beliefs and asking what they're based on. At the end of this inspection, our beliefs may shift—or maybe not. But with curiosity and humility, we can have a more sophisticated, respectful discussion in the process.

COVID Precautions

Campus COVID policies will be enforced. Everyone must wear a mask covering nose and mouth. You will be asked to wear a mask if you come without one. Those who do not comply must leave the room and will forfeit attendance and participation points for that day. Let me know early in the semester if you have a medical exemption. Currently, there are no social distancing requirements. COVID protocols may change over the semester. I will keep you apprised of any changes.

Academic Integrity and Honesty:

There is zero tolerance of any form of academic dishonesty, including, but not limited to, cheating, plagiarism, copying, and falsification, as per UC Berkeley's Code of Student Conduct: <http://sa.berkeley.edu/conduct/integrity/addressing-misconduct>. Instances of academic dishonesty will be reported to Student Judicial Affairs for investigation. Additionally, you may lose points for the entire course component that any dishonesty is associated with (e.g., zero points on the final). Please note that it's possible to plagiarize without intending to. If you have any questions about what plagiarism is or how to avoid it, do not hesitate to contact me.

Disruptions to the Semester

The world is wacky these days. We may experience disruptions due to COVID, wildfires, or power outages. In this case, we will move to remote learning.

STUDENT SUPPORTS AND RESOURCES

Office Hours:

Don't be shy, come on by! Office hours can feel intimidating, but don't be scared and don't worry about asking "stupid" questions. There's nothing stupid about wanting to learn or just say "hi." Research shows that office hours can be especially intimidating for first-gen college students, who often think that academic success comes from toughing it out alone, or who feel unprepared to interact with authority figures. I've been there. I was a first-gen student, too, struggling with money and problems back home. Don't be afraid to come on by.

Economic, Food, and Housing Support

If you need economic, food, or housing support, you can find help at basicneeds.berkeley.edu. You may be eligible for money to buy groceries via calfresh.berkeley.edu or our Food Assistance Program: <https://financialaid.berkeley.edu/financial-literacy-and-resources-financial-literacy-and-resources/basic-needs/>. If you need of food immediately, please visit our UC Berkeley Food Pantry at pantry.berkeley.edu/.

Sexual Harassment and Violence Support Services

Survivor Support Services provides information on these issues, including how to file a report and receive support services: <http://survivorsupport.berkeley.edu>. Please note that I am legally required to report incidents of sexual harassment or violence that students disclose to me. To speak to a confidential care advocate: <http://sa.berkeley.edu/dean/confidential-care-advocate/>

SCHEDULE AND TOPICS

Below is a schedule of assigned readings and topics of discussion. Complete readings before class. Our pace and agenda may change somewhat throughout the term. I will keep you informed of any changes. Readings marked with ** are not on bCourses or in the course reader. Just look them up online.

INTRODUCTION

AUGUST 30

WEEK 1: FOOD INSECURITY AND DIETARY DISPARITIES

1. What is a health disparity? What is health equity?
2. What is food insecurity?
3. What are upstream vs. downstream factors?

NO READING

*** SEPT. 6. → NO CLASS (LABOR DAY) ← ***

PART 1: STRUCTURAL AND MATERIAL INFLUENCES

SEPT. 13

WEEK 2: ACCESS-BASED EXPLANATIONS (YOU EAT WHERE YOU ARE)

1. How well does access explain dietary disparities?
2. Access-based explanations make several assumptions about how people act and what people want. What are they?
3. Do these assumptions hold up to rigorous analysis?
4. How do people themselves experience food access? What's included in this subjective experience of access?
5. If we want to reduce dietary disparities, should we focus on increasing physical access?
6. If better access doesn't improve diet quality, does that mean it doesn't matter? What might it still matter *for*?

Watch and read the first three items first:

The Obama White House. 2010. "Eliminating Food Deserts In America"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8My-iWjTBQ8> (video)

The Guardian. 2019. "The food deserts of Memphis: inside America's hunger capital."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E6ZpkhPciaU> (video)

Walker, R. et al. 2020. "Disparities and Access to Healthy Food in the United States: A Review of Food Deserts Literature." *Health & Place* 16(5): 876-884.

Then read and watch the rest:

**Allcott, Hunt, Jean-Pierre Dubé, Molly Schnell. 2019. "Why Food Deserts Aren't the Key Cause of Nutritional Inequalities." *USA News and World Report*. Dec. 27.

<https://www.usnews.com/news/cities/articles/2019-12-27/why-food-deserts-arent-the-key-cause-of-nutritional-inequality>

Chicago Booth Review. 2019. "The Hole in the Food Desert Hypothesis."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HIRbJEYb2Yg>

Cannuscio, Carolyn C., Weiss, E. E., & David A. Asch. 2010. "The Contribution of Urban Foodways to Health Disparities." *Journal of Urban Health*, 87(3): 381-393.

Khazan, Olga. 2017. "Food Swamps are the New Food Desert"

<https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2017/12/food-swamps/549275/>

Landry, Alyssa. 2015. "What Is a Food Desert? Do You Live In One?" *Indian Country Today*.

<https://indiancountrymedianetwork.com/culture/health-wellness/what-is-a-food-desert-do-you-live-in-one-235-million-in-this-country-do/>

SEPT. 20

WEEK 3: ECONOMIC EXPLANATIONS (YOU EAT WHAT YOU CAN AFFORD)

→DUE: TWO POSSIBLE PAPER TOPICS at 11:59PM to bCourses

1. Does healthy food cost too much for people on a tight budget? Or is it affordable?
2. Does food cost explain socioeconomic disparities in diet quality?
3. There's a lot of disagreement about whether a healthy diet is affordable. Why? What is this disagreement about?
4. To reduce dietary disparities, should we focus on making healthy food more affordable?

Drewnowski, Adam. 2004. "Obesity and the Food Environment: Dietary Energy Density and Diet Costs." *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 27(3): 154-162.

DeVault, Marjorie. 1991. "Affluence and Poverty," Chapter 7 in *Feeding the Family: The Social Organization of Caring as Gendered Work*.

Bittman, Mark. 2011. "Is Junk Food Really Cheaper?" *The New York Times*, 24, SR1.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/25/opinion/sunday/is-junk-food-really-cheaper.html>

Stic. 2013. "[How To Eat Good on a Hood Budget.](http://plantbasedonabudget.com/7-ways-to-eat-good-while-on-a-hood-budget-by-stic-of-dead-prez/)" (read comments as well—enough to get an idea of people's varying reactions)
<http://plantbasedonabudget.com/7-ways-to-eat-good-while-on-a-hood-budget-by-stic-of-dead-prez/>

**Carlson, Andrea. 2015. "Following Dietary Guidance Need Not Cost More..." *Amber Waves*. United States Department of Agriculture. (Read online)
<https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2015/september/following-dietary-guidance-need-not-cost-more-but-many-americans-would-need-to-re-allocate-their-food-budgets/>

SEPT. 27

WEEK 4: THE GRIND OF POVERTY AND RACISM (YOU EAT WHAT YOU CAN MANAGE—AND TO MANAGE)

1. How does the experience of poverty and racism hardship shape what people eat, now and in the future?
2. The authors present several different views of how the grind of poverty affects what people eat and how they *experience* eating on a budget. Compare and contrast these views. Which one(s) do you find most compelling? Why?
3. From the perspective of this week's readings, how do we reduce dietary disparities?

Mullainathan, Sendhil and Eldar Shafir. 2013. "Focusing and Tunneling," "Borrowing and Myopia," and "Poverty," Chapters 1, 5, and 7 in *Scarcity: Why Having Too Little Means so Much*. New York: Times Books.

Warin, M. et al. 2015. "Short Horizons and Obesity Futures: Disjunctures Between Public Health Interventions and Everyday Temporalities." *Social Science & Medicine* 128: 309-315.

Olson, C. et al 2007. "Growing up Poor: Long-Term Implications for Eating Patterns and Body Weight." *Appetite* 49(1): 198-207, Intro and pages 204-207 (starting at "Qualitative Findings")

Kazmierski, K. et al. 2020. "Stress-Induced Eating Among Racial/Ethnic Groups in the United States: a Systematic Review." *Journal of racial and ethnic health disparities*: 1-15

Elkins, Kathleen. 2015. "I spent only \$4 a day on food for a week — and it was grueling." *Business Insider*.

OCTOBER 4

WEEK 5: TASTE SOCIALIZATION (YOU EAT WHAT YOU LIKE)

1. Thus far, our readings have focused on *barriers* to eating more healthily (structure). Is it possible that low-income people actually eat the food they do because they *like* it (agency)?
2. Where do our tastes come from in the first place? Biology? Personality? Socialization?
3. How do our tastes *reflect* social and economic inequalities?
4. How might taste *contribute to* dietary disparities?

Birch, L. L. 1999. "Development of food preferences." *Annual Review of Nutrition*. pp: 41-62.

**Wollan, Malia. 2014. "What Kids Eat All Over the World." New York Times Magazine.
<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/10/08/magazine/eaters-all-over.html>

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1983. "The Choice of the Necessary," Chapter 7 in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Harvard University Press. Pp. 372-381 only.

Daniel, Caitlin. 2016. "Economic Constraints on Taste Formation and the True Cost of Healthy Eating." *Social Science & Medicine* 148: 34-41.

**Dumitrescu, Irina. "The Kid Is Alright: In Defense of Picky Eating."
<https://www.seriousseats.com/in-defense-of-picky-eating>

→ PAPER PROPOSAL DUE TO BCOURSES BY 11:59PM ON 10/7 (THURS.)

PART 2: SOCIAL AND SYMBOLIC INFLUENCES ON FOOD CHOICE

OCTOBER 11

WEEK 6: THE SOCIAL MEANING OF FOOD: CREATING SOCIAL EXPERIENCE AND GROUP LIFE

1. How do people use food to create social ties and social life, even when money is tight?
2. What kinds of ties do we produce through food? How do these ties differ by class?
3. Does using food to create social experience and social ties relate to inequality? How?

4. How can we harness the social force of food to address dietary disparities? If we can't, why?

DeVault, Marjorie. 1991. "Constructing the Family," Chapter 3 in *Feeding the Family*: pp. 77-91.

Kaufman, Leslie and Adam Karpati. 2007. Understanding the Sociocultural Roots of Childhood Obesity: Food Practices among Latino Families of Bushwick, Brooklyn. *Social Science & Medicine* 64(11): 2177-2188.

Arnade, Chris. 2016. McDonald's: You Can Sneer, but It's the Glue that Holds Communities Together. *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2016/jun/08/mcdonalds-community-centers-us-physical-social-networks>

OCTOBER 18

WEEK 7: THE SOCIAL MEANING OF FOOD: STATUS AND DIGNITY

1. How do concerns about status and dignity shape food choices even when money's tight?
2. How do these concerns about status and dignity relate to identity—who we are, who we want to be, and who we are *not*?
3. Charles and Kerr focus on England in the 1980s. What would be the contemporary US version of their argument?
4. What are the social consequences of failing to eat in "respectable" ways?
5. What are the possible health consequences of eating in "respectable" ways?
6. How do we think about the balance between preserving dignity and promoting health? Do they conflict? Are they complementary?

Veblen, Thorstein. 1994[1899]. *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions*. Pp. 15-16, 24-38, 84-85, 87-90, 102-104, 115-116.

Charles, Nickie and Marion Kerr. 1986. "Eating Properly, the Family and State Benefit." *Sociology* 20(3): 412-429.

Hurt, Byron. 2016. *Soul Food Junkies* (documentary)

OCTOBER 25

WEEK 8: MID-TERM SYNTHESIS

In-class documentary: *A Place at the Table*

Reading: TBD

Come ready to analyze and synthesize the perspectives we've covered so far

→ ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY DUE TO BCOURSES BY 11:59PM ON 10/28 (THURS)

NOV. 1

WEEK 9: HIERARCHIES OF TASTE: CONSTRUCTIONS OF “GOOD FOOD”

1. What characteristics of food do people in different social classes appreciate?
2. Why do people in different social classes appreciate different characteristics of food?
3. How do these definitions of good and satisfying food relate to economic circumstances? How do they relate to social/symbolic concerns (e.g., status, identity, etc.)?
4. Do different social constructions of “good food” shape dietary inequalities? If so, how?

DeVault, Marjorie. 1991. “The Significance of Style,” Chapter 8 in *Feeding the Family*. pp. 203-226.

Johnston, Josée, and Shyon Baumann. 2007. "Democracy versus Distinction: A Study of Omnivorousness in Gourmet Food Writing." *American Journal of Sociology* 113(1): 165-204.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Harvard University Press. pp. 177-187.

PART 3: STATUS, STIGMA, AND MORALITY

NOVEMBER 8

WEEK 10: HEALTH AS HIERARCHY (“GOOD” FOOD = “GOOD” PEOPLE?)

1. In the popular imagination, what defines the “good” eater and the “bad” eater?
2. How do definitions of “good” and “bad” eaters relate to “good” and “bad” kinds of people?
3. What are the consequences (social, psychological, health) of constructing some people as “good” eaters and others as “bad” eaters?
4. Is healthy eating just elitism dressed up as science? If so, what are the concrete implications? What would that matter?

Crawford, Robert. 2006. “Health as a Meaningful Social Practice.” *Health* 10(4): 401-420.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction*. pp. reread 178-179.

Finn, S. Margot. 2019. “Food Injustice: What the Food Movement Misses about Poverty and Inequality.” *The Breakthrough* <https://thebreakthrough.org/journal/no-11-summer-2019/food-injustice>

**The Onion. 2014. “Woman A Leading Authority On What Shouldn’t Be In Poor People’s Grocery Carts.” <https://local.theonion.com/woman-a-leading-authority-on-what-shouldn-t-be-in-poor-1819576454>

NOVEMBER 15

WEEK 11: FOOD AND HEALTH AS RESISTANCE

→ 11/15: EMERGING FINDINGS DUE at 11:59PM to bCourses

1. Is healthy eating just elitism dressed up as science? Or can healthy eating and health itself be forms of resistance?
2. Under what conditions is healthy eating a tool of liberation vs. a tool of oppression?
3. For *whom* can healthy eating be a tool of liberation?

Nelson, Alondra. 2011. *Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight Against Medical Discrimination*. Chapters 2. Pp. 49-74

Potorti, Mary. 2017. "Feeding the Revolution": The Black Panther Party, Hunger, and Community Survival." *Journal of African American Studies* 2(1): 85-110.

View Online (not in course reader):

**"The Movement to Define Native American Cuisine."

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/17/dining/new-native-american-cuisine.html>

**Grimes, Andrea. 2017. "The Creator Of 'Resistance Kitchen' Explains Why Food Is Resonating In The Age Of Trump." <https://www.fastcompany.com/3067716/the-creator-of-resistance-kitchen-on-why-food-is-resonating-in-the-age-of>

**Wey, Tunde. 2020. "White Food Media and the Commodification of Resistance." *Scalawag Magazine*. <https://scalawagmagazine.org/2020/07/food-magazines-identity-politics/>

NOVEMBER 29

WEEK 12: SOLUTIONS AND FOOD WELL-BEING

1. Why does the most prominent way of addressing food insecurity fail to achieve its goal?
2. How might the emergency food system actually undermine attempts to address hunger's fundamental causes?
3. What alternatives are there?

Fisher, Andrew. 2017. Introduction (pp. 1-8); Ch. 1 (skim pp. 12-19), Ch. 2 (ONLY pp. 54-58; 65-69); Ch. 3 (skim/skip pp. 78-88¹). *Big Hunger: The Unholy Alliance Between Corporate American and Anti-Hunger Groups*. MIT Press.

Additional reading TBD

→ DUE DEC 15, 11:59PM: Final Paper

¹ This section outlines why corporations give to charity and why hunger in particular is a palatable, politically neutral cause. Feel free to read if you think it would be helpful.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Writing: When we write, we see more clearly what we do and do not know. And when we write clearly, we show that we know something well. Strong, clear writing requires substantial rewriting and revision. Please take advantage of “drop in” or “by appointment” writing tutoring at the Student Learning Center (<http://slc.berkeley.edu/writing>), and consider seeking feedback from your peers. Of course, while peer review can provide essential guidance, your final product must reflect your own thinking and work.