Examining Nutrition Science through Cross-Cultural Engagement

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Abstract
Despite keen interest and strong commitment among indigenous communities to address food sovereignty and diet-related health inequities, very few indigenous scholars choose nutrition sciences and/or dietetics professions. Why? Cross-cultural engagement offers a means to explore structural (systemic) barriers that may discourage indigenous scholar participation. Results suggest implicit cultural assumptions permeating these disciplines contribute to “blind spots” where food and health relationships emphasizing harmony and participation with nature go under-developed and overlooked.

Introduction
Every human society has developed its own understandings of food and health. Nutrition science and dietetics disciplines tend to approach food and health issues through material and physiochemical dimensions. Food as nutrients. Food as fuel. Food as bioactive molecules. Food as a commodity. Food as an object for human manipulation.

Many Indigenous knowledge systems allow for physiochemical differences but also emphasize relational dimensions of food and health that are often overlooked by nutrition science. Food as nurturance. Food as participation in the world. Food as consciousness. Food as meaning. Food as connection. Food as personal experience.

Methodology
Cross-cultural engagement (CCE) represents a craft of empathically engaging the food and health understandings of non-European cultures. This critically reflective approach emerged through developing trusting, respectful, long-term relationships with indigenous peoples. It includes opening oneself to cognitive frameshifting, a practice of temporarily stepping outside of one’s habitual, professionalized thought patterns and into an indigenous framework of background assumptions. This shift in cognitive ground creates a different perceptual location, or standpoint from which to reconsider disciplinary thought styles. CCE practice allows implicit, often subconscious cultural assumptions “hidden in plain sight” to become more visible and explicit.

Results
The practice of CCE helps to explicate cultural values that are often implicit, yet permeate scientific practice. For example, human control over nature and human ascendency over other life forms are often emphasized to the extent they subjugate respect for nature and considerations of social and epistemic justice. Nutrition science relies heavily on de-contextualized strategies that emphasize harmony and participation with nature go under-developed and overlooked.

Implications
While biomedical approaches to nutrition are invaluable, they are limited by constraining theories to serve certain human value outlooks over others. As a practice, CCE holds promise for: 1) Extending skeptical inquiry into implicit disciplinary tenets seldom given over to critical consideration; and 2) Broadening scholarly inquiry through deliberate attempts to cross cognitive boundaries and empathically inhabit different cognitive worlds. CCE holds potential to both deepen and broaden disciplinary inquiry.

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