

Food-Related Well-Being in a Diaspora Situation: The Psychological Dimension

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Introduction

Europe has witnessed a sharp increase in the number of people seeking protection due to several political and ethnic armed conflicts; 2.3 million refugees sought asylum in Europe in 2015 and 2016, a vast majority from Syria (European Parliament, 2017). Refugees who successfully reached Europe have to adapt to new lifestyles and are confronted with a variety of emotional problems, as well as economic and social adversities. Recently, food has been considered as an enhancer of refugees' well-being and as an avenue for helping them to resettle and integrate into their new communities.

Research objective

- To explore how Syrian refugees understand their psychological well-being in a food context, as they are confronted with a new food environment and changes in dietary habits.

Theoretical framework

We developed a framework (Fig. 1) that integrates the functional, symbolic, and hedonic goals of food consumption with insights on the psychological well-being components, to guide the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data.

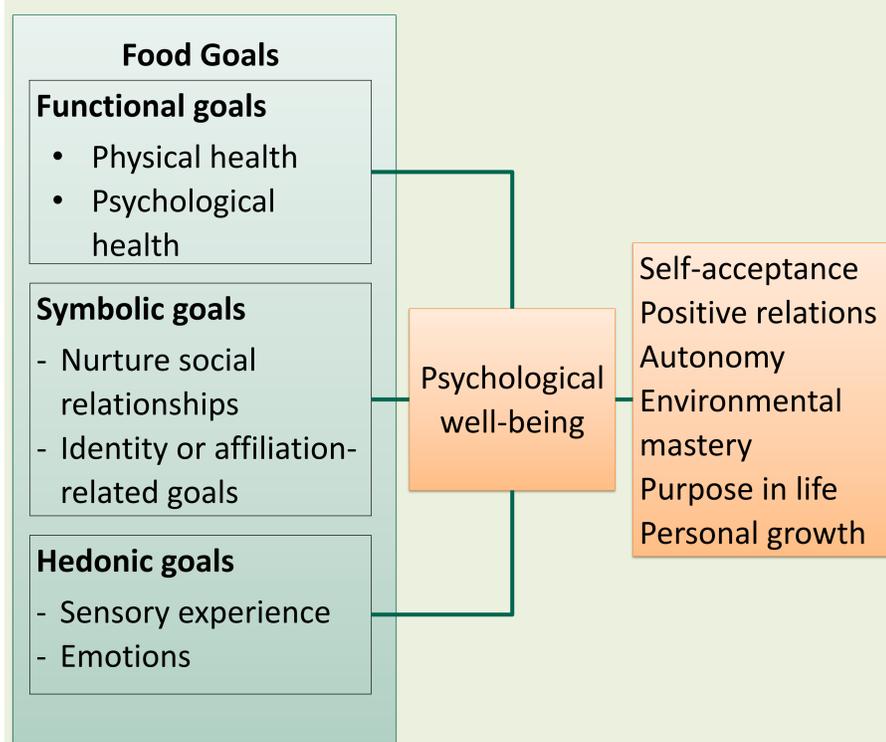


Fig. 1: Framework integrating food goals with psychological well-being

Methodology

Explorative qualitative approach:

Data collection:

- 34 semi-structured in-depth interviews with Syrian refugees and asylum seekers
- Sampling: purposive and snowball sampling

Data analysis: qualitative content-based analysis

Results

- Participants revealed a strong affinity to their Syrian food and a constant comparison between what they used to have in Syria and what is available in Germany.
- Food plays a comforting role and sometimes is used as a way to block out worries and negative thoughts.
- Participants have loose autonomy and weak environmental mastery over food choices, especially during war, migration journey (Fig. 2), and temporary settlement in initial reception centers.
- Languages barrier and food illiteracy have a negative impact on autonomy and environmental mastery while solidarity through informal networks has an enhancer effect.
- Participants are convinced of the importance of adopting healthy eating habits but lack motivation and guidance.



Fig. 2: Refugees scramble for food during the migration journey

Conclusion

Effective programmes are needed to:

- ensure that refugees have the knowledge, skills, and resources to navigate their new food environment;
- empower refugees to protect their traditional dietary patterns and alleviate the adverse health effects that result from changes in dietary habits;
- engage refugees to achieve an inclusive, diverse, and sustainable food system.

Reference

European Parliament. (2017, June 30). EU migrant crisis: Facts and figures. Retrieved from <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/eu-migrant-crisis-facts-and-figures>