Cafeteria Culture: An Anthropological Approach to Lunchtime in a Central Florida Elementary School

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Abstract
Public school cafeterias are used by nearly 51 million children (ages 4-17) in the United States every day. With over 40% of the approximately 73 million children (ages 0-17) participating in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), public school lunches carry resounding nutritional, social, and educational significance for their consumers. This fact, coupled with frequent media attention to school lunch food, notwithstanding, a notable lack of social scientific engagement with both students' perspectives and NSLP operators persists. Divided into two studies, this research utilizes ethnographic methods to explore students' lunchtime experiences within a Central Florida public elementary school cafeteria. Both works are grounded in information collected from 22 semi-structured and unstructured interviews with students, parents, cafeteria workers, school faculty, and a county official while also participating in a one-month lunchtime observation period in Spring 2017.

The first study utilizes ethnographic methods to investigate students' food selection, social practices, and mealtime behaviors within the cafeteria. In this work, I argue that student's preferences are most often informed by taste and familiarity, though both age and personal belief systems strongly outline students' experiences. In the second study, I focus on the top-down priorities of nutrition, food production, and student feedback that guide how institutions construct lunch menus for elementary students. Specifically, I investigate what role public institutions play in forming elementary school students' understandings of food and expectations for mealtimes. Synthesizing findings from both studies, I assess how social, economic, and industry pressures are tangible within local cafeteria and governmental contexts. This research contributes to academic scholarship and public policy regarding childhood nutrition in institutionalized settings and advocates for the inclusion of elementary-aged children as important social actors in their call for increased and dietarily-inclusive food options.

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