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**Organic Food Consumption as a Marker of Socioeconomic Class**

**Introduction**

Haverford College’s Dining Center is the one dining hall on campus, and thus, at least for a student’s first year at Haverford, everyone has access to the same quality of food. This, coupled with Haverford’s socioeconomically diverse student body, makes for a unique foodscape. An investigation exploring the relationship between organic food consumption and the socioeconomic class of current full time Haverford College students was done to explore how food choices represent boundaries between socioeconomic classes. This research is important as it studies the links between organic food consumption and social class issues.

An optional 11 question anonymous survey given to current full time Haverford College students was used to conduct an observational study investigating how a student’s socioeconomic status (SES) growing up influences his/her’s food choices on campus as well as how his/her food consumption pattern may have changed throughout their time at Haverford. The survey was split into two sections, with the first six questions asking about food consumption at home and the remaining five questions about food consumption at Haverford. The survey was distributed via email blast to obtain a random sample and eliminate any confounding factors. Data was collected for one week, resulting in a sample size of 29. Although, not a large enough sample size to test for statistically significant correlation, the data collected will show to some extent the effect socioeconomic class has on food choice at Haverford. This study drew from the theoretical framework in Amartya Sen’s *Hunger and Entitlements*, Amy Guptill’s, *Food and Identity: Fitting in and Standing Out* and Dana Vantrease’s *Commod Bods and Frybread Power: Government Food Aid in American Indian Culture* to investigate organic food consumption as a marker between social class boundaries on Haverford’s campus.

**Theoretical Framework**

In *Hunger and Entitlements*, Amartya Sen claims present day famine is due to the lack of ability individuals and families have of acquiring food. He states possessing the ability to acquire food is determined by individual’s access to food, specifically his/her endowment (land, labor power) and exchange entitlement (wages, food prices). Even with public food assistance programs in the United States, food disparities between socioeconomic groups exist[[1]](#footnote-1), and thus understanding the social and economic ties that give rise to such a problem will be critical in being able to provide adequate food entitlement for all.[[2]](#footnote-2) Currently, most individuals obtain food through supermarkets. Hence, a large portion of access to food and food choice is not only determined by taste and convenience, but also monetary ability, which is a leading influence in organic food consumption for low-income individuals. The average American household allocates 15% to 18% of their food budget to fresh produce [[3]](#footnote-3); if low-income households were to meet the USA’s Dietary Guideline for organic food consumption, they would need to devote 43% to 70% of their food budget to fruits and vegetables.2 This is near impossible for low-income households to afford if they would like to feed everyone in their household; therefore, they turn to a diet primarily consisting of processed and highly preserved foods [[4]](#footnote-4), which are not only cheap, but also possess a long shelf life, making them ideal for feeding a whole family.

Although on Haverford’s campus each student has the autonomy to make healthy and organic food choices if they chose to during their first year, it is important to remember food is culture and ultimately helps define identity. It is through food that individuals connect with their heritage and discover who they are.[[5]](#footnote-5) Therefore, if given the choice between unhealthy food and organic food, certain individuals may be more inclined to make the unhealthier food choice in consuming processed foods, if there is a history of marginalization that has resulted in their family repeatedly being in low social class. Consumption of unnatural food is even more likely if these students view food as reminder of ‘home’, especially in an environment different and far away from home during their first two semesters on campus. However, this too can be a result of nutritional miseducation. The ideology of how unhealthy food regardless of adequate nutritional knowledge can come to define certain ethnic and cultural traditions is better explained by Amy Guptill and Dana Vantrease.

In *Food and Identity: Fitting in and Standing Out*, Guptill discusses the origin of soul food. Deriving from the resources made available to generations of African American slaves in times of need, soul food has come to be equated with black cultural identity. Consisting largely of meat products, processed and fried foods, many health-related issues arise with its frequent consumption; however, some individuals continue to consume it as a way to reclaim their Afrocentric culture.[[6]](#footnote-6) Another instance of where food displacement in the United States resulted in unhealthy food developing into a complex symbol of a cultural identity occurred with Native American tribes. In *Commod Bods and Frybread Power: Government Food Aid in American Indian Culture*, Vantrease discusses how historically, commodity foods were distributed as food aid to Native American tribes displaced onto reservations. A lack of governmental aid and barren land resulted in American Indians becoming entirely dependent on these commodity foods as a primary food source, which, like soul food are heavily processed, preserved and possess questionable nutritional value. Frybread, made from FDPIR ingredients, has come to be a symbol of Indian identity, so much so that it is now commonly present in powwows.[[7]](#footnote-7) Native American tribes continue to receive commodity foods, but many blame it for certain health consequences. Restricted by either socioeconomic status and/or environment, these American Indians do not have much autonomy over their food choice, and therefore have no option but to consume commodity foods as a large part of their diet.

The reality of the social hierarchy in American society is that poor and working class individuals primarily only have access to processed cheap food. This has been proven true throughout history, so much so that these foods have integrated into certain cultures, regardless of their nutritional value. Equally important, it is through food that individuals connect with their heritage and ancestors. Thus, this project will look at how history of SES (student’s economic background) can play a role in influencing food choices and behaviors toward organic food consumption on Haverford College’s campus.

**Results**

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| **Table 1: Subjects and SES** |
| SES | Frequency | Percent |
| Poor | 4 | 13.8% |
| Working Class | 2 | 6.9% |
| Middle Class | 7 | 24.1% |
| Upper Middle Class | 9 | 31.0% |
| Upper Class | 7 | 24.1% |
| Total | 29 | 100.0% |

**Table 1: Subject and SES.** Summary of subjects in this study and their self-identified socioeconomic status (SES). With a small sample size, there is a good chance the data may be slightly skewed.



**Figure 1: Socioeconomic status (SES) and Household Food Consumption.** A bar graph illustrating the most common type of food eaten in students’ household growing up across social class. All subjects in the survey reported eating home-cooked meals frequently; thus, home-cooked meals as a food category was excluded to better compare differences in food consumption. Here we see the Upper Class and Upper Middle Class have the highest consumption of organic food consumption, followed by the middle class, poor, and working class.

**Figure 2: Reasons Subjects Did Not Eat Organic Food Growing Up.** Subjects who reported not eating organic food growing up were asked the reason(s) why. This bar graph illustrates that across different SES, monetary constraints proved to be the biggest factor hindering organic food consumption. Subjects also reported other reasons, with 25% choosing other, 8% lack of time to cook home-cooked meals and 8% access/structural barriers.

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| **Table 2 : Socioeconomic status (SES) and Organic Food Consumption at the DC.** |
| SES | When you eat at Haverford, do you normally go for the organic/healthy food option? | Total | Percent Who eat Healthy |
| Yes | No |
| Poor |  0  | 4  | 4 | 0 % |
| Working Class | 1 | 1 | 2 | 50% |
| Middle Class | 4 | 3 | 7 | 57% |
| Upper Middle Class | 9 | 0 | 9 | 100% |
| Upper Class | 6 | 1 | 7 | 86% |
| Total | 20 | 9 | 29 | 69% |

**Table 2: Socioeconomic status (SES) and Organic Food Consumption at the DC.** The contingency table above illustrates a trend between students’ tendency to pursue healthier and/or organic food choices at Haverford’s dining center (DC) and their family’s SES. The wealthier a student’s household growing up, the larger probability that student will make healthy food choices at the DC

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| **Table 3: Food Choices and Changes in Food Consumption at Haverford College** |
|   | Did food choices changes for the healthier upon coming to Haverford? |
| Yes | No |
| When you eat at Haverford, do you normally go for the organic/healthy food option? | No | 2 | 7 |
| Yes | 11 | 9 |
| Total | 13 | 16 |

**Table 3: Food Choices and Changes in Food Consumption at Haverford College.** The odds of students switching to healthier food options at Haverford if they originally did not consume organic food is 0.29 compared to that of individuals who already eat organic food, 1.22.

**Figure 3: Reasons Why Food Choices Changed for the Healthier at Haverford.**  This bar graph shows for subjects who reported changing their food consumption habits for the healthier (more organic), 92% of them did because they now have a better of knowledge of food. Sports and the Dining Center’s lack of appealing options were the second reason why students changed their diets for the healthier, followed by peer pressure and other.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this observational study was to determine if a relationship between Haverford College students’ SES and organic food consumption exists on campus. A small sample size made performing inferential statistical methods impossible; thus, these results are not statistically significant. Descriptive statistics were used to explore patterns observed between the two.

Upper or upper middle class students reported the highest rate of organic food consumption amongst all socioeconomic classes; no organic food consumption was reported for poor or working class students. When the latter was asked why they did not eat organic food growing up, 58% reported monetary constraints as the biggest barrier, 25% other, 8% lack of time to cook home-cooked meals and 8% access/structural barriers. These results correlate with Sen’s theory, specifically that it is not only economic, but also social factors that limit an individual’s ability to obtain food, in this case, organic food.

To determine if a lack of organic food consumption and food choices at home extended into a student’s time at Haverford, these low-income students were asked about their food choices at Haverford and if it had changed for the healthier (more organic). 50 % of working class individuals and 100% of the poor students surveyed reported continuing to eat unhealthy foods. The odds of these low-income students changing their eating behaviors for the healthier was 0.24. Such a low odds ratio indicates this is not likely. In contrast, students coming from a middle, upper middle, or upper class background had an 81% average of eating healthy/organic on campus. The odds of these students switching to healthier food options at Haverford if they originally eat organic food on campus is 1.22. In relation to Vantreases’s discussion on food and culture, these results show that low-income individuals do tend to make less healthy food choices. According to Vantrease this can be a result of identity, but it can also be due to taste preferences. However, taste preferences over a long period of time are directly correlated with what type of food an individual ate most growing up, which solidifies the notion that SES can unconsciously influence food choice throughout one’s life. Overall, in regards to individuals who reported changing their food consumption habits for the more organic/healthier on campus regardless of socioeconomic status, 92% of them did so as a result of having a better of knowledge of food. This parallels with Vantreases’s and Guptil’s discussion on food and culture: nutritional miseducation amongst all classes tends to be one of the leading reason for poor food choice outside of monetary constraints.

The data gathered illustrates a positive trend between students’ tendency to pursue healthier and/or organic food choices at Haverford’s dining center and their family’s SES. Upper and upper middle class students ate organically more frequent while growing up. They were also the group of subjects with the highest probability of continuing to do so on campus. The opposite was true for low-income students. Thus, the wealthier a student’s household growing up, the larger probability that student will eat organically and make healthy food choices at Haverford’s Dining Center. Organic food consumption can indeed be a marker between social classes on Haverford’s campus.

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2 Cassady, et al,2007 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Drewnowski, Adam, and Petra Eichelsdoerfer. "Can Low-Income Americans Afford a Healthy Diet?" *Nutrition Today* 44, no. 6 (2009): 246-49. doi:10.1097/nt.0b013e3181c29f79. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
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6. Guptill, Amy. " Food and Identity: Fitting in and Standing Out." In Food, Ethics, and Society: An Introductory Text with Readings. Oxford University Press, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Vantrease, Dana. " Commod Bods and Frybread Power: Government Food Aid in American Indian Culture." In Food, Ethics, and Society: An Introductory Text with Readings. Oxford University Press, 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)