The traditional food of migrants: Meat, water, and other challenges for dietary advice. An ethnography in Guanajuato, Mexico

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ABSTRACT

The term “traditional diet” is used variously in public health and nutrition literature to refer to a substantial variety of foodways. Yet it is difficult to draw generalities about dietary tradition for specific ethnic groups. Given the strong association between migration and dietary change, it is particularly important that dietary advice for migrants be both accurate and specific. In this article, I examine the cultural construct of “traditional foods” through mixed method research on diet and foodways among rural farmers in Guanajuato, MX and migrants from this community to other Mexican and U.S. destinations. Findings reveal first, that quantitatively salient terms may contain important variation, and second, that some “traditional” dietary items – like “refresco,” “carne,” and “agua” – may be used in nutritionally contradictory ways between clinicians and Mexican immigrant patients. Specifically, the term “traditional food” in nutritional advice for Mexican migrants may be intended to promote consumption of fresh produce or less meat; but it may also invoke other foods (e.g., meats or corn), inspire more regular consumption of formerly rare foods (e.g., meats, flavored waters), or set up financially impossible goals (e.g., leaner meats than can be afforded). Salience studies with ethnographic follow up in target populations can promote the most useful and accurate terms for dietary advice.

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1. Introduction

The term “traditional diet” is used variously in public health and nutrition literature to refer to the pre-colonial and wild foods of colonized groups (Bersamin, Zidenberg-Cherr, & Lucik, 2007; Blanchet, Dewailly, Ayotte, Bruneau, Receveur, 1996; Kuhnlein & Receveur, 1996; Leatherman, 1994; Neu houser, Thompson, Coronado, & Solomon, 2004; Shintani, Hughes, Beck ham, & O’connor, 1991), to post-migration diets of rural or agrarian migrants now living in industrial contexts (Cham bers, Pichardo, & Davis, 2014; Guarnaccia, Vivar, Bellows, & Alcaraz, 2012; Lee, Popkin, & Kim, 2002; Neu houser et al., 2004; Popkin, 2001; Wandel, Råberg, Kumar, & Holmboe-Ot tesen, 2008), or to historically consumed foods in communities facing aggressive market pressures on diets (Schröder, Marrugat, Vila, Covas, & Eloisa, 2004; Trichopoulou & Lagiou, 1997; Wiedman, 2010). Despite this substantial variation, both linguistically and in terms of dietary content, the term remains a common theme in nutrition and acculturation research. Dietary advice for migrating and acculturating groups that is drawn from these literature may be confusing or offer unachievable instruction. As Fagerli, Lien, and Wand el (2005) have shown, clinicians must be able to communicate with both dietary and cultural-linguistic relevance for these vulnerable populations. Given the well-documented nutrition transition in many parts of the world toward less healthy foods (Popkin, Adair, & Ng, 2012), the concept of a “traditional diet” deserves greater circumspection in public health nutrition and clinical practice.

Mixed method studies of acculturation and dietary change have produced divergent conclusions about the manner and form of change from “traditional” consumption patterns to contemporary ones (Abrado-Lanza, Ambrister, Flores, & Aguirre, 2006; Ayala, Baquero, & Klinger, 2008; Booth et al., 2001; Chambers, Pichardo, & Davis, 2014; Romero-Gwynn et al. 1993; Satia-Abouta, Patterson, Neu houser, & Elder, 2002). For example, trends indicate that Latino immigrants “acculturate” to consume fewer fruits, vegetables and beans than in a “traditional healthful diet,” substituting more sugar and sugar-sweetened beverages (Ayala et al., 2008,
Yet because migrant group cohesion and adaptability vary by location and over the life course, it is difficult to generalize dietary change into group/ethnic models of acculturation (Lockwood, Lockwood, Abraham, & Shryock, 2015; Martínez, 2013; Renne, 2016). Instead, dietary acculturation involves a variety of cultural, social, demographic, and socioeconomic influences (Ebrahim et al. 2010; Guarnaccia et al. 2012; Kleiser, Mensink, Neuhauser, Schenk, & Kurth, 2010; Lawton et al. 2008; Nicolaou et al. 2009; Renzaho, 2004; Wandel et al. 2008). And the acculturation paradigm is now expanded by a wealth of more granular research on “constructs” like parenting, familism, and cohesion operating in the decisions and behaviors of migrants (Jasso & Becerra, 2003; Pearson, Biddle, & Gorely, 2009a; Pearson, Biddle, & Gorely, 2009b; Sussner, Lindsay, Greaney, & Peterson, 2008; Smith-Morris, Morales-Campos, Alejandra Cataneda Alvarez, & Turner, 2012; Vega et al., 1986).

In this article, I examine the cultural construct of “traditional foods” through mixed method research on diet and foodways among rural farmers in Guanajuato, MX and migrants from this community to Mexican and U.S. destinations. The specific goal was to determine whether the concept of “traditional food” was salient for a community of rural Mexicans and Mexican immigrants. My discussion contributes case data on the construct of “traditional food” for migrant populations, and offers a critical assessment of this term for dietary advice. Specific attention is given to the salient terms *maíz* (corn), *carne* (meat), *agua* (water), and “traditional food”.

### 2. Methods

This research was a multi-year, multi-site ethnographic investigation of the needs and support systems of binational Mexican families vis-à-vis changing dietary patterns over time and location. Research sites included a Mexican *rancho* (village), that community’s primary internal migration site, and it’s primary external migration site. As an anthropological ethnography, the study produced quantitative and descriptive data about these Mexican-immigrant informants, as well as more detailed narratives on migration, family structures, foodways and mealtime habits. Like Baer (1998), Himmelgreen, Romero Daza, Cooper, and Martínez (2007), and others engaged in collaborative and cross-disciplinary research on dietary change, I contrast quantitative methods with extended interview and participant observatory data on locally unique issues.

#### 2.1. Research sites

The primary site for this research, El Gusano, is a small, farming *rancho* with no commercial activity beyond a handful of home-front *tiendas* (shops) selling mainly snacks, paper products, and cleaning supplies. In El Gusano, participant observation, free listing activities, interviews, and dietary surveys were conducted. Two additional sites that were essential to understanding the context of migration were Dolores Hidalgo and Dallas/Fort Worth (among El Gusano and other Guanajuato families who had migrated to those destinations). Dolores Hidalgo is the *municipio* (county center) serving El Gusano, and a town of approximately 55,000 residents, county government offices, two university campuses, and numerous commercial and infrastructural developments. Dallas/Fort Worth is a large, metropolitan center in the U.S. and the primary international migration destination for residents of El Gusano. In Dolores Hidalgo and Dallas/Fort Worth, interview and participant observation data, but no free-list data, were collected.

#### 2.2. Recruitment and sample description

Recruitment in El Gusano occurred in collaboration with a local development foundation, la Fundación Comunitario del Bajío (FCB) and with the invaluable assistance of two local *promotoras* who were able to introduce us to nearly all of the 60 families in the village. El Gusano residents are subsistence farmers who supplement their income through produce sales in nearby towns and occasional wage labor of some household residents. Almost half (43%) of sampled households received remittances from internal and international migrant family members. The average age of our informants was 42 years, and their average highest grade level achieved was 5.0. We interviewed equal numbers of men and women. Average household income was $56 US with an average $33 US spent on food.

These informants were interviewed in their homes or community locations. Recruitment and general rapport/trust-building were improved by the live-in presence of both the author and research assistants for several weeks prior to the beginning of, and during, data collection; and by the affiliation of our project with the ongoing community development network sustained by the FCB. The researchers lived with several key informants, shared all meals with them or other community members, and participated in events at the rancho’s community building. We thereby spoke with or met at least a third of our sample prior to recruitment.

Following an informed consent procedure approved by the [instituition name removed] IRB, a sample of 30 informants provided free-lists to the prompt of “traditional foods” (Bernard, 2002). An additional sample of 30 informants provided semi-structured, recorded interviews, and completed a battery of survey-style questions on the topics of migration, family, and foodways. Demographic characteristics of the sample are reported elsewhere (citation deleted). Field notes taken during participant observation were produced at least nightly, and discussed every 3 days across team members and with select key informants (selected depending on topic) following grounded analysis techniques (Bernard, 2002).

#### 2.3. Research design

For the free listing activity, informants were asked, “name what you consider to be traditional food”. If clarification was requested, informants were told to define “tradition” however they viewed it, and all subsequent answers were encouraged and included. For example, if the respondent then asked, “do you mean traditional for Mexico?” or “traditional for me?,” the answer was always “yes, whatever you consider “traditional food”. All responses were recorded in order of utterance, and informants were given ample time to exhaust their ideas on this term.

For in-depth ethnographic interviews, a 30-item interview guide was used and included prompts for a description of meals (with whom, roles, where, what was eaten), possible sources for food, and what migrants eat while away. At least the top eight Salient items, and sometimes additional food items, were also discussed.

#### 2.4. Data analysis

Free listing is a “deceptively simple” technique that is “a mainstay of rapid assessment research” (Bernard, 2002, 282–285). By evaluating not simply the frequency with which terms are mentioned by informants, but also taking into account the order of their mention, the value of this technique is expanded (Romney & D’Andrade, 1964). Smith’s (1993) method for computing a free-list salience index was used to take into account both frequency and order of mention, and yielded the quantitative data below. For this
analysis, raw data were first coded through two separate blind codings in Spanish, and reconciled through a consensus method by a native Spanish-speaking RA and the author (Bernard 2002). Recorded interviews were transcribed in Spanish and placed in Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis software for coding. Field notes were tagged manually and selections transcribed digitally for coding in Atlas.ti. Upon completion of data collection, narrative coding was performed on the interview transcripts and field notes as described above. This team also corroborated translation of the codes and select narratives into English for publication. Themes drawn from coded transcripts yielded qualitative data, only a portion of which is discussed below. For the purposes of this discussion, I discuss only those narrative codes that were clearly tied to the salience Analysis.

3. Results 1 — salience of “traditional food”

In Smith’s (1993) salience index of free-list data, the higher the salience index for an item, the earlier and more frequently the item was mentioned on average by informants. Other measures of salience have been used constructively to understand semantic domains and the broader cultural domains of which they are a part (Gravlee, 2005; Smith, Furbee, Maynard, Quick, & Ross, 1995; Thompson & Juan, 2006). My approach was to use Smith’s salience and its components as the touchstone for deeper and more targeted ethnographic observation and interview. This approach emphasizes the value of deep ethnographic description of local variation (Antmann, AresVarela, Salvador, Coste, & Fiszman, 2011; Hough & Ferraris, 2010). Below, I briefly review the key differences among Frequency of Mention, Sequence (or Order of Mention), and the final Smith’s salience in the free-list data (see Table 1).

3.1. Frequency of mention

All terms listed by informants in response to the prompt, “name what you consider to be traditional food” are listed in Fig. 1. Informants listed 49 unique terms with 15 of these items listed by a single informant. Eight (8) items were listed by a minimum of 10 informants and frequency drops off rapidly for the rest of the list. These items are: maíz (corn), frijoles (beans), carne (meat, unspecified type), sopá de fideo (soup with pasta), chile (chili), carne de pollo (chicken), agua (water: pure, with fruit, flavored), and arroz (rice).

3.2. Average Index (order of mention)

The sequence in which items are freelisted by informants allows analysis of early mentions versus late mentions of a term relative to list length. Since the length of informant lists is influenced by memory, circumstances of the interview, possibly even season of the year in this farming community, it should not be taken as a precise and direct reflection of the importance they place on the order of these items. Nevertheless, it is influential in Smith’s Sequence statistic and provides valuable insight to specific items in the domain of “traditional food”.

Each item sequence position is converted to a percentile position within each list, thus representing the relative importance of the term vis-à-vis the informant’s entire list of terms, allowing comparison of informant lists of differing lengths, without losing a sense of the relative order of mention of terms as they were originally given. The Average Index takes the average of all sequence orders for each term across all informants. The higher the Average Index, the earlier and more frequently the item has been mentioned - on average - in free lists generated by informants. Once each code has an Average Index, these can be ordered into a percentile ranking. The formula for this calculation takes the difference between the sequence number of an item and its total count, divided by its count and multiplied by 100 [expressed as (count – sequence)/count × 100]. This is the Average Index Summary, and can be thought of as an item’s percentile ranking for the free listing data set as a whole. The five highest Average Index items were: frijoles, chile, tomates/jitomates (tomatoes), avena (oats or oatmeal), and sopá de fideo.

3.3. Salience

The final statistic, salience is the sum of all Average Index scores for each term over the total number of different terms. Each food item’s number of mentions, and order of mentions relative to the data set as a whole is contained in this statistic. This statistic gives the gross mean percentile rank of an item across all lists [and follows the formula: salience = (Sum of the item’s percentile ranks/Total number of lists)]. It is thus a weighted average of the inverse rank of an item across multiple free-lists. It is a measure that captures frequency of mention, order of mention, and relative rank within lists for the data set as a whole. The top five salience items were: maíz, frijoles, agua, carne de res (beef), and carne de pollo.

The top items in the salience analysis confirm a pattern over centuries of Mexican foodways brought in corn, beans and meat when available (Baer, 1998; Pilcher, 2012). In other words, corn, beans and meat are part of a shared concept of “traditional food” for this community. These data conform to known patterns for the larger Mexican population, and offer a salient model of “traditional foods”. More specifically, 8 items (corn, beans, meat, sopá de fideo, chicken, chili, agua, and rice) were mentioned by at least one-third of informants, with the frequency dropping off rapidly for subsequent terms.

However, a comparison of all three plots suggests that any single metric may overlook or even mask important local details. The dot-plot images in Fig. 1 offer a quick visual comparison of the three main components of Smith’s salience. For example, only one of the most frequently mentioned items was also the earliest mentioned (beans). Also, several early-mention items were listed by only a few informants (tomates, avena). For further analysis of these contrasts, I turn now to ethnographic interview data on these items of either high Frequency of Mention (F), high Average Index (AI), or high salience (S). Four items merit deeper consideration: carne, agua, refrescos (refreshments or sodas), and another small subgroup of items which I will discuss “flavor and emotion”.

4. Results 2 - salience data in ethnographic context

4.1. Carne (meat) and dietary advice

The salience of carne, or meat, refers to four different coded terms. Informants listed carne or some type of meat (e.g., roast beef, sausages, hash) as a “traditional food” a total of 41 times during the free listing activity. Meat presented a challenge during coding, however, because we were reluctant to merge the various types of meat mentioned. Reporting the Frequency of Mention (F), Average Index (AI) and Salience (S) for each, these included meat (unspecified, P 15, AI 54 ranking 16th of 49, S 111), chicken (F 12, AI 46 ranking 24th, S 12.54), beef (F 9, AI 34 ranking 31st, S 12.94), and pork (F 5, AI 49 ranking 23rd, S 1.51). Had we merged all types of meat into a single code, the total Frequency would have been 41, surpassing maíz as the top item by almost double. The separate animal sources of meat were, therefore, retained in the salience analysis to preserve variation in this category. Such high Frequency of Mention for meat (in all its forms) might suggest that meat was
consumed frequently. But participant observation made clear that meat was not consumed on a daily basis by most families in El Gusano. Ethnographic data contribute two additional points. First, a stated goal of this research was to consider the implications of the concept of "traditional food" for public health nutrition and clinical practice. Observations from an afternoon spent with one key informant suggest that clinician conceptions of meat as a "traditional food" may be different from what migrants themselves perceive. These events and paraphrased quotes were recorded in field notes:

On March 16, participant observation with Lupe. A doctor’s visit at Mount Street Clinic; errands and conversation/preparing dinner for her two sons and their families. [At the doctor’s appointment], the nurse calls Lupe into the exam room. I am introduced, Lupe asks permission for me to attend. No audio-recording. Entire appointment occurs in Spanish.

The nurse escorts us to an exam room, chatting warmly about Lupe’s family, who I am, and about Guanajuato. Dr. Phillips arrives within a few minutes and greets Lupe with a hug. The doctor spends almost 25 minutes asking Lupe about her general health, health history, family history, her “activity level,” diet, and “stress.” They discuss one son’s infant baby and Lupe’s involvement in a diabetes patient support program at this same clinic. They also go over her lab results from the past several weeks, charting progress on weight and glucose. The interview is more thorough than may occur in some settings but I have seen this many times in Mount Street clinic, and with this doctor in particular. Dr. Phillips’ Spanish is excellent and she dedicates substantial energy to demonstrating empathy, asking personal questions, and brainstorming with Lupe about these foods. Some of this may be due to my presence, notepad in hand; but the friendliness that Dr.

---

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spanish term</th>
<th>Approximate meaning</th>
<th>Frequency of mention</th>
<th>Average Index (order of mention)</th>
<th>Smith’s salience</th>
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<td>maíz</td>
<td>Corn</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>44</td>
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<td>frijoles</td>
<td>Beans</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>17.69</td>
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<td>Meat (unspecified)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>54</td>
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<td>Soup with pasta</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>79</td>
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<td>Chili</td>
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<td>46</td>
<td>9.87</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Chicken</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>12.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>agua (pura, de fruta, de sabor)</td>
<td>Water (pure, with fruit, flavored)</td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>13.48</td>
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<td>Rice</td>
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<td>61</td>
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<td>Beef</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>12.94</td>
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<td>Eggs</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>8.02</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Pasta</td>
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<td>66</td>
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<td>Lentil</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>Gourds (squash)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>37</td>
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<td>nopalitos</td>
<td>Nopal (or prickly pear) cactus</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>Soda</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>Cheese (white)</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>Prickly pear fruit</td>
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<td>avena</td>
<td>Oats</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>1.43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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2 All informant, clinician, and clinic names are pseudonyms. This clinic is a specialty clinic that targets Spanish-speaking, uninsured residents in Dallas.
Phillips shares with most patients in the halls and waiting area indicates she is consistently engaged at this deep level.

Dr. Phillips orders blood work and a urine sample and renews Lupe’s prescription for Metformin. She reminds Lupe to eat the “traditional foods” she served at home “in Guanajuato” [the home state for many of Dr. Phillips’ patients], and encourages her to cook these for her sons. She praises Lupe for cooking “fresh,” “home-made” foods, and comments on how “lucky” her sons are that she is there to help them.

… [On errands after the doctor’s appointment] Shopping at Fiesta, we buy … whole pinto beans, vegetable oil, corn tortillas, a bag of pork chops and cuttings, several small chilis ….

Although anecdotal in the current context, these events illustrate a pattern of dietary advice seen in public health and nutrition literature (examples cited earlier), and corroborated by Guarnaccia et al. They found among Oaxacan migrants in New Jersey that while migrants “have more access to food, refrigerators that are fuller, and more meat, such changes are not all positive” (Guarnaccia et al. 2012, 115). They report that informants received instruction from clinicians to return to traditional foods “that the land produces … such as chípil and hierbamora and nopales” (ibid.). But in the ecological context of migration, these foods are rarely available and even less often affordable. Lupe’s pork purchase was of higher fat content than I ever saw consumed in El Gusano, and she now sometimes fries her store-bought tortillas in oil, rather than toasting them on a griddle (without oil) as she had done in the rancho. In the context of migration, where cultural groups of various backgrounds cohere in new ways, advice about a
“traditional diet” is not always clear or practical. Why, then, would clinicians (like Dr. Phillips) and researchers still use the phrase “traditional food” in imprecise or unrealistic ways? There are several reasons for recommending “traditional food” consumption: to reference a specific historical dietary practice; to convey appreciation or respect for one’s past or heritage; or to invoke memories or historical knowledge. Dr. Phillips’ intent — evident in the full context of the clinical encounter and her long-term relationship with Lupe as a patient — involved all three. She had discussed the fresh fruits and vegetables of Lupe’s Guanajuato home, and encouraged her continued consumption of these foods; she knew Lupe’s migration history and its importance to her identity; and she encouraged Lupe’s continued memory of and orientation toward the dietary and cultural patterns of her rural background.

In sum, according to the salience analysis, “traditional food” includes meat. But as for Guarnaccia et al., the type of meat purchase in the migration context is different than “traditional” forms in important ways (e.g., fat content). While the phrase may invoke notions of the fresh, lean consumption patterns of agrarian life, use of the term in dietary advice may set up an impossible goal for poor migrants.

4.2. Translating agua, frescas, and refrescos

The second item of note from the salience data was agua, literally “water”. This item had a fairly high Frequency of Mention (F 11) but was not mentioned early (AI 19 ranking 38th of 49). The term was used to refer to pure water, but also to aguas frescas, or flavored waters. Aguas frescas are drinks made of water, lemon, and sometimes sugar, and are widely recognized in Mexican dietary literature (e.g., Rivera et al. 2008; Théodore et al. 2011). But it was only through conversation during participant observation that the local shorthand for aguas frescas was explained as “aguas”. Indeed, researchers can sometimes find the same shorthand meaningful and appropriate:

Si bien en México se habla de agua “simple,” “natural” o “sencilla” para distinguirla de las aguas frescas, en este artículo el término agua se usa sin ningún calificativo. [While in Mexico we talk about “simple,” “natural” or “plain” water to distinguish it from fresh water, in this article the term water is used without any qualification.]

(Théodore et al. 2011, 328)

In the same vein, “aguas” in my salience analysis captured a variety of drinks. The terms “frescas” and “frescos” as descriptors of drinks also required clarification in ethnographic follow-up. “Frescas,” the feminine form of the adjective for “fresh,” is used with “aguas” (a masculine noun) to indicate flavored waters. And “frescos” is used as shorthand for “refrescos” which can mean both “refreshments” or carbonated, sugary, often colored soda. In the free listing exercise, these terms had been mixed together and potentially confused with ideas ranging from pure water to non-water drinks including various fruit drinks or sodas, even beer.3

Variation in local usages of these terms made a consistent coding of linguistic utterances very difficult. Even Wikipedia (accessed July 31, 2015) reports that in Guatemala and Nicaragua, flavored waters are referred to as frescos, short for refresco (which in Mexico means sodas). However, in Guatemala, sodas are called aguas, short for aguas gaseosas, but easily confused in the U.S. (where immigrant populations arrive from all these nations) with the Mexican aguas frescas (also called aguas for short in Mexico). Our sociolinguistic follow-up with informants teased these usages out, but this technique is time-intensive.

This variation in Latino uses of the terms “aguas,” “frescas” and “refrescos” may reflect a larger transition in the availability of consumable liquids for rural communities. El Gusano had a tienda even before the village had running water, streetlights, or regular teachers and nurses. It is not unlike hundreds of other rural farming communities in Mexico, where Mexican billionaire Carlos Slim now distributes Pepsi products to all the home-front tiendas around the country. In these home-front shops are sold not only sodas and other sweetened beverages, but also packaged snacks, white bread, and sugar-topped sweetbreads. The salient “traditional food” agua was most likely the local aguas frescas or possibly even pure water consumed in El Gusano. The four mentions of refresco in the free listing activity were not enough to place that term as a Salient “traditional food”. But their anecdotal appearance, and the corresponding variation in local and regional linguistic usage, suggests that even a term like agua is not as linguistically straightforward as we might presume.

4.3. Maíz (corn)

Maíz (corn) was the staple grain for every informant and ranks first in the Frequency of Mention (F 21). However, because it was not always listed first, it ranks 26th out of 49 in the Average Index (AI 44). This may indicate a propensity to identify more rare or unique food items first, and to list the ubiquitous items last if at all (Abraca 2004). Basic food stuffs eaten commonly over generations — the strict meaning of the phrase “tradition” (see Oxford dictionary) — are not necessarily the highly prized over time. The consistently high Frequency of Mention for maíz coupled with low Average Index support the interpretation of maíz as a basic and constant part of the diet. These scores also inspire initial confidence that, when maíz is not listed by informants, it is because it is “invisible” or forgotten rather than truly absent from that informant’s diet.

Maíz also illustrates how salience analysis distinguishes between highly memorable, prized, or iconic foods, and those that are ubiquitous and mundane. Fitting argues, “as both a crop and a food for humans, mainly in the form of tortillas, maize is a particularly powerful symbol of the nation in Mexico, with many often contradictory layers of meaning” (Fitting, 2011, 14). These layers of meaning range from the simplicity of indigenous, pre-contact diets (and associated social markers and stigmas attached to indigeneity), to trans-national movements of small-scale farmers against multi-national agricultural corporations. The degree to which any of these referents is in the mind of a free listing interlocutor can only be teased out through qualitative methods and a knowledge of political-economic histories. Fitting’s full-length ethnography of maize is a good example of the type of in-depth study that can be made of a single food item with such history and tradition in a given country. It also helps explain why maíz would have a Frequency of Mention of 1, but a much lower Average Index in our data.

4.4. Flavor and emotion

Finally, there were several items mentioned consistently early in the free listing activity, but not by many informants. That is, they had a low Frequency of Mention, but a high Average Index. These included chile (chili, F 12, AI 79 ranking 2nd, S 5.87), tomates (tomatoes, F 2, AI 76 ranking 3rd, S 0.6), ovaña (oats or oatmeal, F 1, AI 73 ranking 4th, S 1.43), and sopa de fideo o pasta (pasta soups, F 13, AI 70 ranking 5th, S 12.36). One interpretation of these Average Index scores is that these items were big priorities for some,

3 One informant listed cerveza, beer, as a “fresco” along with “aguas”. Conversation yielded clarity around his linguistic shortening of the term “refresco” to “fresco,” meaning a refreshment.
irrelevant to others. They are memorable and important items that carry “traditional” meaning for those who ranked it highly, but do not even come to mind for others.

Mexican chilis (including the Capsicum annuum or “bell pepper” and smaller varieties like the serrano and jalapeño) are recognized in the culinary world as a Mexican spice (Katz, 2009). The American tomato is similarly revered as an emblematic food of Central/South America, originally feared as poisonous and later becoming a staple in many “traditional” European dishes (Jenkins, 1948). Oats were listed early, but by only one person. This demonstrates an outlier effect on quantitative metrics, deserving of further explanation if not study. And the fourth item may be more instructive about the relevance for patients.

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relevance of the highly subjective and irregular data on topics like Food has a signi...the emotional importance of...term as part of dietary advice, dietary advice can exploit the emotional importance of “tradition”. Whether the emotional attachments that migrants feel to particular foods or tastes (Brown, Edwards, & Hartwell, 2010), social factors in shared meals (ibid., see also Smith-Morris et al. 2012), or nostalgia (Brown et al., 2010; Holtzman, 2006; Lupton, 1996; Viladrich & Tagliaferro, 2016), use of the term “traditional food” invokes a memory- and emotion-infused set of foods. Clinicians may use this productively, but only if they are knowledgeable about the patient-specific interpretations and experience these words invoke.5

5. Discussion

In the contemporary era, “traditional” foodways are as difficult to identify and quantify as they are to maintain. We have confirmed through salience analysis that a shared concept of “traditional food” exists for this community around corn, beans, and meat. However, ethnographic follow-up revealed nutritionally relevant variation in discussions of meat (i.e., fatty vs. lean) and something as basic as water (i.e., egu but also frescas and even refrescos). These “traditional foods” are created not solely through the mechanisms of time and culture, but through intentional and proprietary acts.6

6. Limitations

Two limitations in this research deserve mention. First, the sample for this analysis has direct utility for the larger study of which it is a part: a study of migrant foodways in three locations, in or emanating from Guanajuato, Mexico. The results may not be representative for other parts of Mexico or for Mexican immigrants to the U.S. from other regions or urban settings.

Second, ethnographic follow-up on Salience items does not provide a replicable data set, but does indicate a range of linguistic and cultural meanings behind Salient terms in nutritional surveys. Anecdotal evidence in this discussion is made more useful through reference to other studies (ethnographic and others) of Mexican diet and foodways.

7. Conclusion

Given the ethnic and local variation in what constitutes a...
“traditional diet”, dietary advice to migrants must be both accurate and specific. The challenge of developing culturally appropriate recommendations for specific migrant populations requires careful assessment of these populations (Ayala, et al., 2008; Satia et al. 2000). As Palinkas and Pickwell have argued, the treatment of groups as “traditional” and “non-traditional” oversimplifies acculturation processes, and weakens the applicability of some studies (1995).

The body of research on regional variation in foodways is growing, and remains an essential correction to the overgeneralizing pattern of population health studies. This research demonstrates the utility of mixed (qualitative and quantitative) methods for more accurate dietary recommendations for migrants. In-depth research techniques help ensure a cautious application of cultural paradigms like “traditional” and even “ethnic” or “Mexican” foods. More specifically, this research builds on existing calls for methodological and cultural specificity (Fagerli et al., 2005; Neuhouser et al. 2004; Satia-Aboua et al. 2002) by showing: first, that quantitatively salient terms may reflect or contain important variation, even from a single small, rural community; and second, that items of nutritional concern in many modern diets – like consumption of “refresco,” “carne,” and “agua” – require direct and explicit communication by clinicians to ensure patient-specific understanding.

Migrant dietary change is a highly variable process. In our eagerness to promote healthy dietary choices among migrants, we have sometimes oversimplified notions of change through use of the term “traditional food”. This discussion brings evidence of the diversity of that term’s meaning, and to the potential confusions over “traditional food” in a sample of Mexican migrants’ families. Use of the term “traditional food” in nutritional advice for Mexican migrants may be intended to promote consumption of fresh produce or less meat; but it may also include other foods (e.g., meats or corn), inspire more regular consumption of formerly rare foods (e.g., meats, flavored waters), or set up financially impossible goals (e.g., leaner meats than can be afforded). Salience studies with ethnographic follow up in target populations can promote the most useful and accurate terms for dietary advice. For nutritional research to be useful across diverse ethnic and migrating groups, the lucidity and economy of salience and ethnographic tools are well suited.

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References
