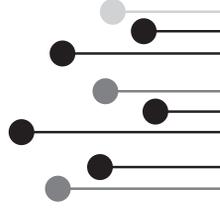


Connect and Reconnect With Food

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Anthropology



For over 100 years, anthropologists have engaged in the reflective process of asking why their discipline matters. Now, in this time of the COVID-19 crisis, anthropologists, like people in all walks of life, are asking why what we do is important and how it can help us now and in the immediate future.

On a basic level, anthropology is the study of humans. Anthropologists consider what it means to be human, in all its diversity throughout time (past, present, and future) and across the world.¹ For the most part, we all focus on culture. Culture has allowed humans to adapt, survive, and make meaning out of life in every environment throughout human history. By carefully observing people, having conversations with them, and participating in cultures other than our own, anthropologists document the diverse ways people live, behave, think, and believe.

Anthropologists dig deep into the complex systems that humans create to understand and learn from them. But how can this work benefit people in times of crisis? One answer can be found in food. Anthropologists who study this topic direct most of their efforts at understanding the fascinating relationship between humans and what we eat. Some key ideas presented here come from my own research experiences as well as from the generations of anthropologists who have inspired and taught me through their work. The following points provide a foundation:

- Humans connect through food. Eating together is part of being human. To be human is to be part of a community.
- When food systems break down, communities and civilizations collapse.
- Food provides a mode of reconnecting with our humanity, our community, and our Earth, especially in this troubling time.

Humans Connect Through Food

Whether we recognize it or not, humans connect every day with the earth from which their food grows and with those who cook our food and with whom we eat. Of course, we need to eat to live, but we use food in many other

ways.² If you take the time to reflect on the meaning of food and the needs it serves, it is clear that food brings us comfort, healing, and a way to care for others by nourishing and giving.

The coronavirus pandemic has caused people to think about food in ways they had not before the crisis—the supply chain, shortages, shopping challenges, and storage of surplus foods. People are also thinking more about the less privileged—food insecurity, limited access to affordable and quality food, and risk of infection for supermarket employees. The list could go on.

Consider what you have eaten since the outbreak of COVID-19. No doubt the choices you make about the food you purchase and consume are influenced by your income and occupation. The privileged class—of which I am a member—has adjusted more readily to the stay-at-home and work-from-home mandates. Those of us who have continued to collect an income and work from home likely have the time and resources to engage with food in new, more intimate ways: We are cooking more and using extra time to plan meals and/or share them with family members, partners, and housemates.

This increased engagement with food has given us an opportunity to think about the often-underappreciated connections between food and our health and well-being. It has brought people together in old-timey ways, over the table and through recipes that may reflect a person's heritage or identity. For the first time in many decades, those who live together are now sharing two and even three meals each day. Also, the general public is taking more proactive steps to produce their own food. Online sales of seeds, fruit trees, and live baby chickens, as well as gardening items have increased dramatically.³ During the pandemic, it is easy to see how we are connected to food and people.

When Food Systems Break Down, Communities and Civilizations Collapse

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When someone's income is taken away or reduced, their connection to the food system can break down. The widespread loss of income and other pandemic-induced financial strains exacerbate food and health problems.⁴ Those who are less privileged have fewer opportunities to interact with food in the positive ways I describe in the previous section.

The period when unemployment shot up from 3% to 14.4% (30 million unemployed) was a sign of a breakdown in the food system because of compromised income.⁵ As a result, poverty and food insecurity drastically increased as more people needed help to feed themselves and their families. A related sign of system breakdown is found in skyrocketing demand for food assistance. Some food banks saw demand increase by 100% to 600%.⁶ Drone videos and aerial photos of cars lined up to receive emergency food supplies shocked us. Much of what food banks and pantries distribute comes from supermarket donations, which have cut back on their contributions amid the chaos in the food supply chain, which results in empty shelves.

Health disparities based on race and class have been more starkly defined in the pandemic. Tribal communities in the United States, such as the Navajo Nation, illustrate how food shortages intertwine with poverty and preexisting health conditions to increase a community's susceptibility to COVID-19 infection and hospitalization.⁷ Many Navajo peoples struggle with obesity, diabetes, hypertension, substance abuse, high cholesterol, depression, and poor overall health. Food habits are an essential element of most of these diseases. These circumstances are problematic whether or not a person contracts the disease. That is, pandemics impact impoverished communities and countries most acutely. Food plays a key role in these relationships and outcomes.

Likewise, people who cannot work from home, such as those in the food industry (grocery store employees, meat packers, agricultural workers, and many others), put their health and well-being in jeopardy every time they go to work. Their connections with others have also been disrupted because they put their family and friends in more danger if they share space and meals with them.

Food Provides a Mode of Reconnecting With Our Humanity, Our Community, and Our Earth

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For people who do not have access to food, there are individuals, groups, and organizations that seek to offer relief, a way of reconnecting them to their humanity. During the COVID-19 crisis, agencies have ramped up programs to address food insecurity in communities with high unemployment, placing special emphasis on children. School employees and bus drivers are delivering food to schoolchildren who would otherwise go without meals. Chefs who can no longer work in restaurants have started cooking and delivering meals to those in need and offering free online cooking workshops. College students are grocery shopping and delivering food to older adults and those who live with them.

The COVID-19 crisis has provided a moment in time when we all can contemplate connecting and reconnecting to people through food. We can think about the past and present role of food in our lives and the future choices about how we intend to use food as a form of connection. Each time we eat, buy food, and share a meal, we can consider the deep and meaningful health implications of what we put into our bodies. We can reflect on what those around us eat and how it affects them. We can think about people who do not have access to healthy food and ask why. We can investigate where the food we buy comes from and examine the entangled food chain that brings each item to the table. We can make efforts to diversify our own meals as well as the food sources that feed us.

When the COVID-19 pandemic has passed, we may have a renewed appreciation for the seemingly simple act of eating. This is an especially

important outcome of the crisis because the biggest health concerns for all people are related to nutrition.⁸

Food quality and food security are human dilemmas. There are no simple solutions to the complex issues that humanity faces, such as healthy eating, social inequality, food insecurity, and pandemics. Nevertheless, we can begin to work through these challenges. We can give back and connect with others using food. In this way, I am optimistic that we will move forward with ingenuity, flexibility, and hope.

Sharyn Jones is a professor of anthropology who earned her PhD from the University of Florida. She trusts the ideas presented in this paper because the expanse of human history has illustrated that food is an important part of what makes us human. Humans need community and food provides ways for us to express our appreciation and respect for others. Jones has spent her career studying people and food and has published books, articles, book chapters, and essays on this topic.

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