Chapter 1
Introduction to Understandings of Healthy and Unhealthy Food

Harrison Esam Awuh

Abstract The introductory chapter begins by making a strong case for the food system transformation based on the argument that food system transformation currently has a very limited focus on social sustainability. More importantly, there is a lack of sufficient recognition for the inclusion of consumers' perspectives in pathways for food transformation. In addition, the chapter argues for explicit and diverse transition pathways regarding food systems. Drawing on the dearth of knowledge in connection with what (un)healthy food means in some contexts, the chapter argues for a more inclusive global vision of (un)healthy food as a pathway for achieving a diversified transformation but also pluralising the voices within the transition process. By raising six key questions, the chapter further explains the geographic notions of place and space as the conceptual basis for describing the study's contexts. In conclusion, the chapter quizzed whether place or space has much influence in framing meanings of what is healthy or unhealthy. Without pre-empting the data gathered, the theory of sensemaking is also employed to explain plausible meanings of what is (un)healthy.

Keywords Food meaning · Sensemaking · Place · Space · Consumers · Healthy · Inclusion

Introduction

Concerns about global food security (or insecurity) gained increasing traction following the sharp price rises for agricultural and other commodities after the 2008 financial crisis. Following that, global hunger increased in 2016 after a prolonged decline (FAO 2018). More recently, the 2020 coronavirus crisis and the Russia–Ukraine war have again put food security (or insecurity) high on the policy agenda. This means that the world is currently confronted with significant decreases in food security and spreading public health challenges. In addition to guaranteeing food production, improved access to food has become an important component in thinking

H. E. Awuh (✉)
Department of Human Geography and Spatial Planning, Utrecht University, Utrecht, Netherlands
e-mail: h.e.awuh@uu.nl

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about food security. Furthermore, food and farming systems of the early twenty-first century overproduced cereals, oils and sugars and under-produced fruits and vegetables, thus, creating an imbalance between the optimum the world requires to benefit from a nutritious diet and what is produced (KC et al. 2016). Thus, the 'Triple Burden of Malnutrition' (i.e. under-nutrition, stunting and wasting), micronutrient deficiencies (iron, zinc, iodine and vitamin A) and over-nutrition (overweight and obesity) still pose major public health problems (Ebbeling et al. 2002; Global Nutrition Report 2017). Statistically, over two billion people are overweight or obese (Popkin 2017). Most countries face higher mortality from these nutrition-related non-communicable diseases (diseases that are not transmissible directly from one person to another) than under-nutrition which was the scourge of the past millennium. All these challenges add more urgency to how we think about food. As a result, food issues are currently at the centre of the public debate with issues such as the health and nutritive dimensions, the production process and the content of additives in the food products, the accessibility of fresh food and the origin of food products (Olsson 2018).

Considering that food production is responsible for 20–30% of global environmental impact (Tukker and Jansen 2006; Onwezen et al. 2019), the daily food choices of consumers have a huge impact on the environment and public health. Therefore, consumers can improve both environmental impact and health by changing their diets. In addressing this, an increasing number of voices have highlighted the need to change the overarching structure of food-related policies, which they claim: address food safety issues, but not nutrition; lack regulations in connection with how food is consumed; and encourage food production systems with no link to sustainability (Global Nutrition Report 2017; Onwezen et al. 2019).

Consumers to Play a Central Role in Healthy Food Transformations

However, transforming current food systems to support healthy and sustainable food system outcomes is a complex proposition. This is exemplified by the fact that consumer behaviour has not been sufficiently understood. It is often assumed that consumers will make rational choices with the right knowledge base (Chater et al. 2010). This suggests that people will refrain from unsustainable behaviour if they know they will receive punishment and engage in sustainable behaviour if a reward is permitted. This fits within the wider literature on command and control, 'the incentive-based approach' and the dominant paradigm of the ABC framework (attitude–behaviour–choice) of contemporary environmental policy (see Shove 2010). Although these rational approaches have led to a degree of favourable outcomes, the changes generated with these methods are often temporary or short term (Evans et al. 2012) or simply not significant enough.

Therefore, there is a need to consider the roles of factors such as intrinsic motivations, moral convictions, social preferences, reciprocity and the impact of peer groups

(Garforth 2015) in shaping the transition choices people make or could make. People do not only base decision-making on conscious deliberations. Research has shown that human behaviour is complex and influenced by a large range of internal and external factors (Onwezen et al. 2019). Food systems' outcomes reflect complex causal processes that can involve interactions amongst various drivers (Ericksen 2008). This approach will provide a better understanding of why people stick to unsustainable choices despite more sustainable options or why people choose to switch to more sustainable food practices despite being surrounded by unsustainable choices. Understanding human preferences, visions and norms is the first step in the transformation towards more healthy and sustainable food choices.

The Problem of Insufficient Attention to Inclusion

Nevertheless, one key stumbling block exists in understanding consumer behaviour concerning healthier and more sustainable food transformation. It is inclusion. Narratives about pathways to food system transformation are still either largely expert-driven (technocentric, technocratic) or based on ideas developed by a middle-class niche movement. Stakeholder participation has often been limited to involvement in agenda-setting, with little stakeholder involvement in knowledge creation, decision-making and (policy) evaluation (Dijkshoorn-Dekker et al. 2020). The monopolisation of power in the global food sector means that a few actors positioned along the food supply chain wield much influence on what, where, when and how food is grown, processed, distributed and consumed (Nature Food Editorial 2020). Focusing excessively on food systems or knowledge as a niche movement could enhance a resistance strategy instead of contributing to system-wide changes. Additionally, existing decision-support tools developed to inform policy-makers on the food system transition are mostly data-driven but hardly consider the activities and preferences of different stakeholders in the food system (Dijkshoorn-Dekker et al. 2020).

The problem of access and inclusiveness in food security is receiving increasing attention in the literature (e.g. Sen 1982; Brons et al. 2020). This relates to problems of social inequalities, which are often linked to more broad-based structural urban inequalities and various forms of social, cultural, economic and spatial exclusion (Kolb 2015; Hochedez and Le Gall 2016). For deprived consumers and ethno-racial minorities, these inequalities combine with unequal capacity for participation in communication with public authorities and community-organised activities for the transformation of living conditions. This leads to increasing mistrust between groups and elevated risk of social unrest in more extreme cases, as revealed by Eriksson and colleagues (2017). This socio-economic exclusion also relates to exclusion in access to education (both formal and informal) as a resource in promoting better healthy food awareness. For instance, there has been an observable shift by middle-class consumers around the world towards diets that are better for overall health. In part, this has been stimulated by a global initiative to promote better food literacy (including cooking skills) amongst middle-class urban dwellers (KC et al. 2016). Enhancing

consumer food education beyond the Western middle class to include vulnerable and disadvantaged groups could contribute to better overall diets globally.

However, such transformations can generate inclusions and exclusions regarding who can partake and who benefits from them (Rose and Chilvers 2018; Rotz et al. 2019). When there is no space for diversity, some systems become hegemonic, generating inequalities and injustices which are non-desirable from a human welfare point of view or ecosystem integrity and sustainability standpoint (Rotz et al. 2019; Fraser 2020). As food systems become increasingly exclusive, serious attention must be given to addressing issues of power over the discourse of food systems—the democratisation of them. Food system transition is also inherently a political process with winners and losers, which involves choices, consensus and compromise about new directions and pathways. New voices in food discourse have much greater potential to act as disrupters of the system, and there is a need to use new entrants to create new products and/or value (Herrero et al. 2020).

Inclusive Perspectives as the Way Forward

Food system transformations and the policies and strategies that support them should become more explicit about the diversity of transition pathways they contemplate. In order to be responsible, transformation pathways should evidently reflect a range of social and environmental needs. The inclusion of a range of actors in determining what the trajectory should be is crucial. More specifically, robust synthesis and assessment processes are needed to strengthen the legitimacy of scientific advice through transparency that encompasses the perspectives of low- and middle-income countries (Webb et al. 2020). There is a need to understand better which contextual factors—both independently and in interaction with each other—affect understandings of healthy and unhealthy food. A more globally inclusive approach to producing meanings and future visions of food is needed to strengthen food systems transformations. For example, there is a dearth of knowledge from the African continent about what people's context-specific meanings and understandings of healthy and unhealthy food are. Or how they see the future of healthy food practices. This dearth of knowledge on what healthy or unhealthy food is in low- and-middle-income contexts precludes the establishment of a comprehensive context-specific theoretical and empirical knowledge of the participation processes in these regions. Consumers worldwide have deeply engrained biological, psychological and cultural relationships to food, which must be acknowledged.

In a nutshell, there is a need for food system innovations to enable the transformation to a more sustainable and healthier food system on a global scale (Hoes et al. 2019) and with global meanings and visions of the future. One thing for sure is that pursuing visions determined by only a select group of people (policy-makers or other powerful actors) is unlikely to be fit for purpose (Klerkx and Rose 2020). Until we articulate inclusive meanings and visions of the present and future, it is difficult to start to anticipate the impacts of a food system transformation and how they can be

made more responsible. This book attempts to investigate these global visions of the present and the future by asking and seeking answers to the following questions:

1. What are the meanings of healthy food in different contexts?
2. What are the meanings of unhealthy food in different contexts?
3. How do people in different countries visualise healthier food futures?
4. What can inhibit the realisation of these desired healthier food futures?
5. What can facilitate the realisation of these desired healthier food futures?

Theoretical Framework: Place, Space and Sensemaking

In order to guide the investigations needed to answer the aforestated questions from a global perspective, this book will use the geography concepts of place and space as a starting point. Space and place are now fundamental geographic notions, to the point that geography has even been defined as a science of place by the famous French geographer Paul Vidal de la Blache (2008) or as a spatial science (see Castree 2005). The conundrum of space and place in geographical knowledge concerns whether the question of 'where?' is sufficiently relevant in the way that 'when?' does in explaining 'how?' and 'why?' certain phenomena occur (Philo 1992). In the case of this book, when, how and why do certain meanings of food prevail?

According to Agnew and Livingstone, the place refers to either a specific location somewhere (an address) or to the occupation of that location (living at the address) (Agnew and Livingstone 2011). In this sense, this book conceptualises place in two ways. Firstly, place is definable entirely in relation to a singular spatial metric (latitude and longitude, elevation, et cetera.) or other spatial grid defined by putatively non-spatial processes (core-periphery, city-hinterland, administrative regions, et cetera.). Secondly, place is also constituted by the impact that being somewhere has on the constitution of the processes in question. From this perspective, 'place' is a meta-concept that allows for the particular stories associated with specific places (Agnew and Livingstone 2011). Furthermore, Farinelli (2003: 11) states that amongst ancient Greeks, meanings of place can be clearly stated as, 'a part of the terrestrial surface that is not equivalent to any other, that cannot be exchanged with any other without everything changing'. This means that place has its own special and unique qualities.

However, increasingly, there has been a challenge to place as insignificant in the face of globalisation. The current challenge to place comes from the idea that the world itself is increasingly placeless with space-spanning connections and flows of information, things and people, undermining the rootedness of a wide range of processes situated anywhere in particular (Agnew and Livingstone 2011). In other words, space has consumed or absorbed place. From this perspective, new technologies are making 'places' obsolete. In this view, place is therefore nostalgic, regressive or even reactionary, and space is progressive and radical (Agnew and Livingstone 2011). To some scholars, globalisation has created networks that are placeless in any substantive, even perhaps locational, sense of the term (Marston et al. 2005). For instance, the term 'place' became associated with past geography, and space in itself

was to be both the new object of study and the basis for a new and all-conquering contemporary geography. This was part of a spatial revolution in geography beginning in the 1960s with an increasing tendency to associate place negatively with the past and space positively with the future (Abler et al. 1971; Harvey 2000). Here, the focus was placed on modelling interaction over space, such as migration flows, diffusion of innovation, spacing of settlements as a function of distance to market, land uses specialisation and industrial location in terms of transportation costs, more than local/regional differences or place characteristics (see Berry 1967). This represents the transcending trend through which social relations and landscapes in place through mobility reflect the increased similarity of everyday life from place to place. In other words, what happens in Almere (The Netherlands) increasingly reflects Bamendas place (Cameroon) because both are exposed to the same spatial elements of globalisation.

The distinction is not only an attempt to render place obsolete. It can also be viewed as an attempt to separate the physical place from the phenomenal space in which the place is located. In this case, place becomes a particular or lived space—place becomes a form of space. The consensus is based on a geometric conception of place as a mere part of space. In this sense, places are nodes in space which are reflective of the spatial imprint of universal physical, social or economic processes. Such contemporary conceptions of space and place depend on relatively complementary conceptions of what they mean—specifically the Newtonian and Leibnizian ones. In the Newtonian view, space is absolute. Space is an entity, independent of whatever objects and events occupy it, containing these objects and events and having separate powers from them (Slavov 2016). In the Leibnizian view, space is relational. This means that although it has no powers independent of objects and events, construed from the relations between them, space can be shaped by relations between objects and events therein (Bouquiaux 2008). The book weighs and absorbs the two views of space, but the Leibnizian approach is more relevant in analysing the meanings of healthy and unhealthy food. In the Leibnizian approach, space is only active because it comprises places where things are located within a force field at any particular moment (Feingold 2004; Antognazza 2008).

Thus, drawing on the post-humanist actor-network theory of Latour (2007), but critical of its reluctance to engage with the 'role of common ground' or place in 'how networks echo back and forth', (Thrift 1999: 313), this book sees places as specific time–space configurations made up of the intersection of many encounters between 'actants' (people and things) that reflect 'practical means of going on rather than something concerned with enabling us to see, contemplatively, the supposedly true nature of what something is' (Thrift 1999, p. 304). This view reiterates that knowledge is always and everywhere geographically contextual and reflexive (Agnew and Livingstone 2011). Knowledge creation and circulation are invariably situated somewhere (Schatzki 1991). However, situating the view within the place vs space dialectic, it is still unclear if place (e.g. specific location in latitudes or longitudes) or space (systems of connections spanning connections and flows of information, things and people) is more influential in determining understandings of healthy or unhealthy food. Therefore, the study aims to address this knowledge gap. It digs

deeper into the meanings of healthy food in different contexts by understanding **why** such meanings exist. Are peoples' understandings of healthy or unhealthy food influenced by the specific locations or by the global networks to which they are connected, directly or indirectly? In order to understand how this place-space dialectic plays out in different contexts, this book draws on the Theory of Sensemaking to understand the acquisition of meanings of healthy and unhealthy food.

Sensemaking

Karl Weick suggests that the term sensemaking refers to 'the making of sense' (Weick 1995: 4). Waterman (1990: 41) adds that it is the process of 'structuring the unknown' by 'placing stimuli into some kind of framework' that enables us 'to comprehend, understand, explain, attribute, extrapolate, and predict' (Starbuck and Milliken 1988, p. 51). Sensemaking is based on the principle that, occasionally, an attempt to explain the unknown is the only way to know how much you understand it. It can mean learning about the culture, politics and overall general structure of a problem. Ancona (2012) adds that sensemaking often involves moving from the simple to the complex and then back again to the simple. In other words, the simple is observing a phenomenon or phenomena. Then, the move to the complex occurs as new information is collected and new actions are taken to explain why the phenomenon is the way it is.

Furthermore, as patterns are identified, and new socio-economic, cultural and ecological information is labelled and categorised to understand the phenomenon, the complex becomes simple once again (as the phenomena become easier to understand). According to Ancona (2012: 6), 'there is no 'right' regarding sensemaking. Sensemaking is not about finding the 'correct' answer but creating an emerging picture that becomes more comprehensive through data collection, action, experience, and conversation'. Therefore, it is not about determining whose understanding of healthy or unhealthy is correct. Rather, it is about understanding why people think certain foods are healthy or unhealthy. In sensemaking, collecting data and observing trends in the data are only starting points. One then has to pay attention to environmental cues, incorporate new information and turn what may be incomprehensible data into useful data that can be used to transform practice. Sensemaking equals observing a phenomenon, looking for plausible meanings and understandings for the phenomenon and adapting the new meanings and understanding to understand better why the phenomenon is the way it is.

Furthermore, sensemaking is not limited to understanding what we observe better. From an organisational and practical level, sensemaking can help understand why certain food habits are difficult to change, for example—why certain consumers could resist certain pathways of food system transformations. Also, sensemaking can help understand what is needed to make people overcome the threshold in transformation of the food system. So, in the domain of agency in food practices, sensemaking is a

Fig. 1.1 Illustration of the concept of sensemaking as used to frame the theoretical base for this book

precursor to more effective action in changing how we eat. Based on acquired meanings and understandings, the chapters in this book would be able to reveal if places still play a significant role through their uniqueness in the acquisition of meaning through social relations. In other words, have places lost their unique capabilities to influence the acquisition of meanings based on social relations in the locales in an increasingly global world? Thus, understanding how places define meanings of social processes will need theoretical grounding based on the concept of sensemaking. After exploring the several chapters in this book and how the different authors try to 'sensemake' observable meanings, understandings and visions of healthy and unhealthy food, the concluding chapter will revisit the research question: are peoples' understandings of healthy or unhealthy food influenced by the specific locations where they are or by the global networks to which they are connected either directly or indirectly? The conclusion will show how much this question can be answered based on the evidence in the chapters. See Fig. 1.1 below for an illustration of the theoretical guideline for this book.

Significance and Uniqueness of This Book

The food system transformation discourse has attracted a lot of research interest, verified by the numerous publications (from students and teachers) searching for all-encompassing solutions to reaching a better food system transformation. Since

consumers who are part of the food system are currently less discussed in the transition pathways, the book will show knowledge of how diverse consumers see healthy and unhealthy food to advance better the process of achieving more inclusive and just food system transformation pathways. This book will also be useful to policymakers who need knowledge of what consumers prefer to create robust policies to enhance sustainable food system transformation. The book has several illustrations with photographs and quotes that immerse the reader in the context within which the data were collected. The investigation of the same set of research questions in different contexts with sometimes different answers shows that there is no single truth or right way to see things. Also, the book presents the view of truth based on the way the respondents see it. It does not seek to impose a normative view of the truth on the way respondents perceive things in their contexts. In other words, it lets respondents determine what is good or bad in their contexts without any judgement.

The following review presents how this book differs from some competing titles and how it makes a unique contribution to knowledge. Gaspar and colleagues (2020) use social representations of Brazilian, French and Spanish dietitians and young laywomen to define healthy food. In relation, this book does not object to the theoretical contributions of Gasper and colleagues (2020) regarding how the discourse on healthy food is constructed; the construction of the meaning of healthy food is framed by social, cultural and symbolic grounds linked to historical and sociocultural contexts. Nevertheless, this book widens the empirical base of the social representation of Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, which are missing in the debates on the meaning of healthy food considering the growing food acculturation in these contexts due to the influx of Western diets. This has created unique (complex) societies with complex food cultures worth investigating. For example, this book extends the investigation of the social representation of food to Buea (Cameroon) and the Limpopo province (South Africa), where environmental heterogeneity and cultural diversity present a compelling case study in both cases for understanding social representations of healthy and unhealthy food.

Mötteli et al. (2016) present a consumers' perspective on the practical understanding of healthy food choices. Like this book, Mötteli and colleagues (2016) focus on consumers' perceptions or meanings of healthy food. However, in their case, such consumer framings are expert-driven—unlike the case of this book, where the meanings are bottom-up. This is exemplified by the fact that in Mötteli and colleagues (2016), the question of what healthy food is has been limited to just food (disregarding food practices). Therefore, there is the selection of some foods by experts for people to make their choices. However, as shown in some of the chapters in this book, healthy food can be a socio-cultural practice, such as how food is prepared and the way it is eaten, which is not within the scope of Mötteli and colleagues' study. Unsurprising, the study concludes that consumers (here referred to as laypeople) lack an understanding of the size and amount of nutrients. Culturally, these conclusions are unfair since they do not consider the competent knowledge system and practices that define what is healthy is other contexts beyond what was specifically selected for the study. In addressing the gap, this book argues for a more explicit and inclusive pathway to a healthy and sustainable food system transformation. Hence, this

book seeks to pluralise the discourse on what healthy food means to achieve more inclusive, diverse and just sustainable food futures.

Looking at consumer beliefs about healthy foods and diets, Lusk departs from the US Food and Drug Administration's public process of redefining the use of the term healthy by companies on food packages. Lusk (2019) extended the discourse to consumers through his research. Following this, it can be deduced that the paper shares the rationality of consumer inclusion, which has been one of the main arguments of this book. Findings from the paper by Lusk (2019) showed that consumers' perception of the term 'healthy' in food mainly alludes to the nutritional value, such as fat content and a certain degree, how much it aligns with guidelines of the food governing body. Besides, he reported that consumers believe the word 'healthy' is broader and nuanced simultaneously. This means that meanings ascribed to healthy cannot easily be defined and universalised to other contexts. The outcomes by Lusk (2019) support the argument that there could be different meanings in different contexts (place-based meanings of healthy food). Nonetheless, although this study by Lusk has highlighted diversity in meanings of healthy by consumers as advanced by this book, the study by Lusk fails to unravel what exactly these meanings are because it was the end result rather than the departure point of the study. Therefore, this book 'Global visions of healthy and unhealthy food' advances the literature by clarifying what these contextual definitions of healthy food could mean through the eight cases (see Fig. 1.2)—some oceans apart.

Lastly, Boatemaa et al. (2018) study food beliefs and practices in poor urban communities in Accra, Ghana. This research by Boatemaa and colleagues (2018) revealed that the urban poor defined healthy food based on how it is prepared, the extent to which it reflects social food norms and affordability. Similar findings are presented in Ghana, Philippines and Cameroon in this book. Hence, it is fair to say

Fig. 1.2 Global distribution of case studies

this book validates some studies that seek to enhance theory-building around the meanings of healthy and unhealthy food. Nonetheless, the comprehensive global outlook of this book gives a higher-level analysis (global) of the meanings of healthy food (compare and contrast) to foster the global transition of the current food system. Most importantly, this book offers a different theoretical frame (sensemaking) to enhance our understanding of what people mean by healthy food.

In a nutshell, the aforementioned studies came close to the aim of this book. Nevertheless, all these sources fall short in one way or the other in providing the knowledge needed to make a truly inclusive transformation in the food system. On a general note, the current literature is yet to have a higher-level (global) discourse on what healthy or unhealthy food means in other places, cultures and traditions. Since the healthy and sustainable food transformation is a global vision that requires input from different people who now live on the margins of the decision-making process regarding the food supply chain, this makes the goal and the timing of this book evermore academically and societally relevant. The authors believe that by synthesising meanings of healthy from different contexts, a global discussion on the importance of consumers, cultures or social representation and, most importantly, what can be done from the consumer side of the spectrum can be kickstarted to enhance policies on sustainable food system transformation.

Chapter Layout

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Chapter 3: Cameroon: Land of Good Food, Agriculture and Various Visions of Good and Bad Food
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Chapter 5: Perceptions of Healthy Diets and Food Futures in Veneto, Northern Italy
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Chapter 11: Entangled Islands: Charting the Geographic Influence of Space-Place Relations in Global Meanings and Visions of Healthy Food

Conclusion

In this book, the authors re-examine the role of place in global meanings and visions of healthy and unhealthy food through national case studies in nine countries across the globe. Here, place is conceptualised as a unique platform that mediates physical, social and economic processes and thus affects how such processes operate. This presents a more holistic view of places as the geographical context for meditating on physical, social and economic processes. But how can we understand these mediation processes? In this book, it will be captivating to see how and if place can still play a role in sensemaking about meanings and understandings of healthy and unhealthy food or not. This book uses a robust empirical perspective with case study chapters to fill this knowledge gap.

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