

## Research Note

### Discomforting Foodways: Reflections on The Challenges Faced by Individuals During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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#### Abstract

While serving as the Assistant Project Director for The Center for Food and Culture's oral history project, *Comfort/Discomfort Through Foodways*, Jerry Reed became particularly interested in the general concept of foods of discomfort, be it through dietary restrictions or the lack of comforting contexts around food. Using data collected during the project, he reflects on the nature of discomfort food, and how it was understood and challenged by respondents to the project. Interestingly, participants of this project found these discomforts easily overcome. This article explores the implications of this finding.

**Keywords:** folklore, food, comfort food, oral history, COVID-19

#### Introduction

Since the beginning of the pandemic, scholars have jumped at the opportunity to research and reflect on the many ways that COVID-19 has impacted more than just our daily lives, but also our psychological well-being and even our fundamental beliefs about the world. Food, the ever-centric part of culture that it is, was highly impacted in so many different ways: obtaining food safely and during various shortages; being able to eat food with others; and a turn to comfort food as seen on social media and other platforms are a small sample of the observed impacts. The concept of comfort food here refers to foods that are "Typically linked with home, tradition, nostalgia, and positive feelings" (Jones and Long 2017: 3), a particularly American idea that stems from psychology around stress and health, linking together unhealthy foods, guilt, and stress relief. However, there is folk knowledge in many cultures that promotes food in general as good for comfort and overall mental health, as is illustrated by one Center for Food and Culture (CFAC) interview "...my grandmother was an immigrant from the Azorean islands... her favorite saying was *coma, coma, teu mal é a fome* which is *eat, eat, your problem is hunger*, which you know, you'll hear that from Jewish families to Italian families" (Sue E., CFAC-JR-SE-6/25/20). Striking a balance between finding foods of comfort and foods of necessity, while avoiding the dangers of COVID-19 along with other pre-pandemic, food-based challenges an individual might encounter could clearly be a problem that others were facing.

Food is not always the comfort it is made out to be either, as much of the previous research on comfort food often explores. Jones and Long (2017) make note of the relationship between the fatty, carb and sugar heavy comfort foods often found in the Western world and rising obesity levels (4), and Tucker (2017) finds many stories and connections within Indonesian foodways that exemplify how even traditional comfort foods can be filled with backgrounds of discomfort, exclusion, and identity divides within the culture:

Simple peasant food, then, evokes a familiar split and an ambivalence in Indonesian identity; indicating poverty and backwardness in a fast-growing and forward-looking country on its way to ever-greater affluence and economic relevance in Southeast Asia and the world on the one hand, and a cherished past of agrarian values on the other, where there is nothing fancy to be found, but nothing unhealthful either, in honest, locally sourced nourishment. (222)

While working as the Assistant Program Director for *Comfort/Discomfort Through Foodways*, an oral history project undertaken by The Center for Food and Culture (Long et al. 2021), I became particularly intrigued with this concept of food causing discomfort rather than comfort while preparing to conduct our interviews. As someone with only a minor food-based immune issue (lactose intolerance), I had become curious about how others with more severe issues were handling food access during the pandemic, especially amidst the numerous reported shortages and the tales of insufficient food substitutions from grocery delivery services. The data produced by the project varied greatly between individuals, eliciting reflections on food challenges due to dietary needs and the nature of discomfort food. In this piece I propose a definition of discomfort food and then reflect on my experiences interviewing and collecting data for this project. The resulting findings illustrate some of the challenges a small number of individuals faced, and suggest further research questions.

### **Discomfort Food**

Before exploring the data produced by the CFAC's project, I would like to reflect on the nature of discomfort food, as it was this concept that first led me to start thinking about the challenges of food allergies and dietary restrictions. Working backwards from the concept of comfort food set by Jones & Long (2017), foods that evoke positive feelings often of nostalgia or relief from emotional or psychological stress, we can look at the positive feelings and associations of comfort food and easily propose that discomfort food is just food that makes the individual feel bad or is food associated with a negative context. We know, however, that food is even more complex than just the act of eating and either enjoying it or not.

While tastes towards certain cuisines, textures, and even appearances vary from one individual to another, distastes can lead to a variety of physical reactions. Food is more than the act of eating. Consuming food is a social event for many people, and how people interact with others around food often produces the same comforting feelings without really being about the food itself. For example, children in the school lunchroom have unique social interactions because they choose to exchange food with their peers as a pro-social interaction (Reed 2020). In the same cafeteria, minority students may find comfort and community by sitting and eating their individual lunches with peers from similar backgrounds (Clack, Dixon and Tredoux 2005; Tatum 1997). Considering this pro-social aspect of food, the community and belonging that commensality can provide, discomfort food then may lack positive interactions entirely, or perhaps contain anti-social aspects.

COVID-19 produced several new contexts that affected the ways in which situations around food could elicit discomfort. Some participants in this study were unable to access common

comfort foods due to shortages, some had worries about obtaining food that fit in with dietary restrictions, and others found discomfort in the new contexts of eating separately from others. As one respondent mentioned in a CFAC interview, “I don’t think I’m in the minority when it comes to saying the concept of sharing meals with friends or other intimates over video chat is both alien and maybe partially unsatisfying. But I’d say I am in the minority when I would say it’s so unsatisfying to me, the concept, that I don’t even want to try.” (Brady D., CFAC-JB-BD-6/8/20). Illustrated here is one of the forms of socializing that was popularized at the start of the pandemic in 2020—eating with friends and loved ones over a video call—a concept that was very alien to many folks at the time and was initially off-putting as well. Virtual socializing was just one way COVID-19 changed food contexts: delivery services, food shortages via supply chain and hoarding, and a valid concern for health safety in obtaining food all played a part in the interaction between the consumer and their food.

### **Reflection on CFAC Data**

Even before COVID-19, folks with dietary restrictions were fully aware that the entirety of the comfort food category was not for them:

I have a number of medical conditions, chronic medical conditions that restrict the way, the kinds of food I have to choose to eat. I really have to eat to live as opposed to live to eat, so, you know, whereas I think for some folks, you know macaroni and cheese is like a wonderful comfort food, and for me it would kill me, so I can't touch that. (Jan R., CFAC-JR-JR-6/24/20)

With this awareness and acceptance, the concern of how someone with such dietary restrictions would be able to get the foods that they can safely eat during a time of scarcity would be understandable. Worth noting here is that throughout the CFAC interview materials, even with many folks noting substantial scarcity in stores, no one had mentioned dietary concerns due to availability of foods. Even the folks with the most restrictive diets were able to continue finding foods that they were able to consume. One way to deal with scarcity of suitable foods was explained by one respondent: “My son and his family live upstairs, I’m in the mother -in-law suite, and so what I did find what is handy is since the quarantine started, we ended up borrowing or asking for food items for my son and vice-versa, if I was short on eggs or milk.” (Gloria E., CFAC-JR-GE-7/21/20). Early shopping time restricted to people over the age of 60, gardening, preservation, and food delivery all helped sustain those with dietary restrictions and other health concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic. In larger cities, some respondents were able to find foods that were in short supply in larger stores, such as flour, in their smaller neighborhood markets.

General health concerns were seen throughout the CFAC interviews, and steps to mitigate them were mentioned. “I’ve been trying to eat immunity-boosting foods just to help my family stay healthier, but also mixed in with, you know, stuff that we normally eat.” (Clara P., CFAC-JB-CP-7/6/20). Sometimes respondents were not as focused on eating healthy foods but felt guilty about their choices, “I’m very conscious of that I am not eating as many vegetables as I should, and I feel really badly about it. So, I’ll make a salad for dinner. I haven’t had greens for, gee, two or three days, that’s horrible, so I’ll make a big salad and then go a couple days without salad again...” (Yvonne L., CFAC-JR-YL-8-13-20).

The general discomfort around food all centered on the same themes in our interviews: socializing and interpersonal connections. Food is far more than just what we eat. Food serves as an expression of our identities, both personal and social, and it works to bind groups together (Belasco 2008). While some were averse to trying to socialize over long distance video calls with friends and families, others found it to be a welcome experience:

I'm Jewish and there's a Jewish holiday in the spring where you're supposed to eat [blintzes]... [her sister's] daughter had been bugging me for a long time for the recipe, but to explain how to make the crêpe thing is a little hard... now this invention of Zoom, like why didn't we think of Facetime or Zoom before, I don't know, but I gave her a cooking lesson... and then she and I made blintzes together, it was so much fun. (Hanna G S., CFAC-JR-HGS-7-8-20).

Other anxieties and discomforts around food focused on procurement, but also swiftly abated. "...I haven't set foot in a store since March 14<sup>th</sup>, but we have an enormous amount of curbside availability... we have curbside food. We have curbside liquor. We have curbside home store, like, you know, home repair type stuff" (Emily S., CFAC-JR-ES-6-30-20).

### **Looking Forward**

Based on the data collected during the CFAC's interviews, many of the discomforts potentially caused by COVID-19 around food were easily overcome by participants. Those at higher risk found safer, alternative ways to obtain their foods, while those with dietary restrictions were still able to continue to find suitable nutrition with ease despite some food scarcities due to panic hoarding. Data within the CFAC is limited, and wider ethnographies and surveys are needed to fully understand the larger impacts that COVID-19 has had on specific cultural groups' experiences around food. Additionally, with some exceptions, the data collected was American-centric, and thus a look beyond the US borders is needed in order to get a more global perspective.

It is difficult to conclude from this limited data whether the experiencing and addressing food discomforts is tied to the identities of the participants. The assumption would be that economic class would be a factor in procuring food, since having more money would give more choices to participants and enable them to find ways around potential obstacles. This is seemingly the case within the data collected in relation to the areas in which the participants lived. Even the interviewees with limited access to a store with fresh produce were able to afford both travel to stores at a further distance and growing a garden on their property.

Community building over food during the pandemic is worth a much deeper and explicit study. Interviews in the project indicate how people have used telecommunication technology like Zoom or Skype to socialize or continue food traditions (see: Hanna G S., CFAC-JR-HGS-7-8-20), with both success and enjoyment but also discomfort and perhaps even disillusionment (see: Brady D., CFAC-JB-BD-6/8/20). Socialization around food has deep impacts on community and belonging, changes around the nature of eating together with others could be greatly impacting community bonds. Looking at how children

socialize during their school lunchtimes shows the importance of shared mealtimes for their social development (Reed 2020). For those concerned about how children have been affected by the pandemic, this is going to be a topic that needs to be explored. Many diverse studies are going to be needed to fully understand the cultural impact of the COVID-19 pandemic today and its repercussions for the future. This merely illustrates the need for these studies to continue to better understand the full picture of these challenges.

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