

More Than ‘Add Women and Stir’

– A Conversation with
Carole Counihan

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ABSTRACT

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Food studies and the study of food and gender have been particularly strong scholarly currents in the US. Here, anthropologist Carole Counihan was one of the first scholars to work with the food-gender intersection. Over the past four decades, she has continued to work with the area in an array of different contexts. In this interview, Counihan describes how she has worked with the gendering of food culture. Along the way, she also offers her perspectives on working in changing academic environments and shares her suggestions for future areas of research.

KEYWORDS

*Food, gender, anthropology, academia, intersectionality/
Mad, køn, antropologi, akademisk, intersektionalitet*

Carole Counihan is Professor Emerita of anthropology at Millersville University, USA. She has been working with food and gender since the early 1970s, and has examined a wide array of topics in the gender-food intersection, including Italian food culture, food activism, ethnographies of food, and issues of race and food. She has authored a series of books, notably *Around the Tuscan Table: Food, Family and Gender in Twentieth Century Florence* (Routledge 2004) and *The Anthropology of Food and Body: Gender, Meaning and Power* (Routledge 1999). With Penny van Esterik, she has edited the two important readers *Food in the US* (Routledge, 2002) and *Food and Culture* (2013 (3rd edition)). She is also the editor in chief of the journal *Food and Foodways*, which is a foundational journal within food studies..

To help us understand the emergence of the recent merger between the fields of food and gender studies, we invited US anthropologist Carole Counihan to share her story about her work in the fields over the years. The following interview emerged from a stimulating email exchange with Counihan the summer of 2015.

Katrine Meldgaard Kjer and Jonatan Leer: You were one of the first scholars to publish work on the intersection between food and gender in the 1970s, and have been active in the field ever since. What initially sparked your interest in the field in those early days?

Carole Counihan: I came to food and gender by way of Italy, which launched my fascination with cultural diversity. After I graduated from Stanford University in 1970 with a BA in history, I spent three years living, working, and traveling in Italy. A visit to Sardinia in 1972 sparked an interest in that island and its people which led me in 1974 to a PhD program in anthropology at the University of Massachusetts where I concentrated on Sardinian culture. The experience of being a woman in Italy, and the constantly surprising differences from being a woman in the USA, led me to ponder gender roles, relationships, and power. Searching for a dissertation focus, I realized that food would be a captivating topic since Sardinians, like all Italians, constantly talked about food and it was at the center of women's lives. Moreover, at that historical moment in the mid-seventies, second wave feminism was penetrating academia and sharpened my resolve to focus specifically on women's experiences – and of course food practices have always been central to women's reproductive responsibilities across cultures and time periods. So there was a fruitful convergence of my interests in Italy, food, culture, and women

that sparked a lifelong study of food and gender.

KMK/JL: The interest in and status of food studies and gender studies has changed radically since your first articles on the subject. How has your own understanding of the intersection between food and gender evolved during this time, and what are your thoughts of the changing landscapes of the fields?

CC: In the 1970s and 1980s, much feminist scholarship began simply by documenting the experiences of women, who had long been left out of the historical record. Food provided a productive lens for gathering data on women's experiences, perspectives, values, and contributions. But feminists felt an obligation to do more than "add women and stir" as Florence Howe (1982) put it. The task was to use the new data on women's lives to expand understandings of history, to reconstruct theory, and to challenge inequality. In the 1970s feminist anthropology produced the key edited volumes *Women, Culture and Society* (Rosaldo et al., 1974) and *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (Reiter, 1975), which joined with the growing focus on food-ways in anthropology inspired by Mary Douglas (1966, 1984), Marvin Harris (1974, 1985), and Sidney Mintz (1985) to launch cross-cultural studies of gender and food like the work of Anna S. Meigs (1984), Miriam Kahn (1986), and Mary J. Weismantel (1988). Early studies of food and gender looked at food roles and meanings, interrogating power relationships institutionalized in taken-for-granted gendered customs and habits. Scholars examined gender in constructions of eating and the body, in alimentary work inside and outside the home, in religious and ideological conceptions of food, in access to nutrients and health concerns, and in power relations around food.

Slowly food scholars' focus shifted from

a concern with women to a concern with gender as they realized that studying women alone was not as effectual as studying them as part of a gender system and as they realized that men's relationship to food was as revealing as women's even as it was less encompassing. Since the turn of the millennium, the study of men and food has taken off, most notably with the *Food and Foodways* (2005) special issue *Mapping Men on the Menu* guest edited by Alice Julier and Laura Lindenfeld, followed by a growing stream of other articles looking at food and masculinity in diverse settings including the home, all male workplaces like firehouses, media contexts like television cooking shows and fitness magazines, professional kitchens, and so on. This growing focus on men's food experiences has enabled rich and nuanced understandings of the power dimensions of gendered foodways. In the future I hope to see more studies that consider men and women together as part of a gendered system and point to egalitarian solutions to the important work of food provisioning.

KMK/JL: Anthropology has long been a dominating discipline within food studies, and indeed, we also feature several articles from anthropologist in this issue. As an anthropologist yourself, what is your take on what is it that anthropology does so well within this field – and what room does this leave for input from other disciplines?

CC: Anthropology aims to gather the emic or insider's cultural perspective and to explore the uniformity and diversity of the human condition. Inherently empirical, anthropology aims to gather in-depth data on food and gender in a small number of cases, enabling us to compare, evaluate and explain gender differences across cultures. Privileging the insider's view has led to gathering data on diverse men's and women's foodways, challenging universalizing claims and naturalist assumptions.

Moreover, anthropology trains its lens on all aspects of the human condition – from material need satisfaction to religious beliefs – and thus provides an important holistic perspective that can integrate the many dimensions of foodways. But anthropology makes room for contributions from other fields – for example for quantitative researchers providing aggregate data to balance anthropological case studies, for historians to build up our understanding of foodways change, and to specialists in economics or media studies, for example, to contribute their specific expertise to analyzing trends and changes in gender and food. Anthropologists welcome enthusiastically the interdisciplinary collaborations of food studies.

KMK/JL: Many studies of food and gender also incorporate other social categories (class, race, ethnicity, age, race etc.) in their analyses. This intersectional perspective has also been prominent in your work. What are the challenges and the benefits of such an approach? Should gender have a 'privileged position' among these social categories? Or should it always be analyzed in intersection with other categories?

CC: Today it is taken-for-granted that studying the intersection of multiple social categories is essential to understanding the human experience. It is equally important to recognize that different categories prevail in different circumstances, making the blanket privileging of gender, race, class or any other social category spurious. In the household food economy, for example, women may hold the responsibility of feeding their families but their culture, class, or race may determine what power, resources, and respect they command.

KMK/JL: In recent years, both gender studies and food studies appear to have gained interest and respect within academia. How do you see the future of the study of food and

gender? Are there in your opinion any issues that demand particular attention as the disciplines move forward?

CC: I believe that the study of food and gender will remain a rich and fruitful arena of scholarship for years to come. There are a number of issues that demand attention; one is the changing balance of responsibilities in feeding the family. As women have increasingly entered the workplace, questions of who will handle food provisioning in the home and how it will be managed are intriguing ones with multiple consequences for gender power, familial division of labor, nutrition and health, and food choice. A second important question is the role of men and women in agriculture and the food industry. We know from the work of Deborah Barndt (2007) and others that women are increasingly filling the lowest paid and most precarious jobs; studies are needed to determine whether these gendered trends are continuing and how they affect women, men, children, and family food security. A third area for research is the role of men and women in alternative food movements and food sovereignty struggles: what motivates them, what roles do they play, how does their gender impact their engagement, and how does their activism affect gender constructions? A fourth important question for future research is how gender is implicated in obesity, diabetes, malnutrition, anorexia nervosa, and other food-related physical and psychological disorders. A last question is how gender will shape the massive presence of food in the media and vice-versa. Up to now, studies of food television, for example, have shown very conservative gender constructions; will future mass media provide an arena for progressive, egalitarian gender roles or continue to reify stereotypes and 'naturalized' roles such as the happy female homemaker and the powerful and authoritative male chef?

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NOTE

1. Written and edited with Carole Counihan.